



The Hundred Parishes

An introduction to

THAXTED



Location: 6 miles north of Great Dunmow. **Ordnance Survey grid square:** TL6130.
Postcode: CM6 2LD. **County:** Essex. **District:** Uttlesford. **Access:** B184, B1051.
Buses (Mon – Sat): 313 and 314 between Saffron Walden & Great Dunmow; 316 between Saffron Walden & Stansted Airport. **Population:** 2,576 in 2001, 2,845 in 2011, 3,400 in 2021.

Thaxted is undoubtedly one of the jewels of the Hundred Parishes with over 200 listed buildings and a wealth of interesting architecture, countryside and history. It appears in the Domesday Book as *Tachesteda*, Old English for "place where thatch was got".

Entering the town from the direction of Great Dunmow to the south east, the broad vista up Town Street towards the Guildhall and the church, seen here, is one of timeless unity and quiet elegance with Georgian buildings blending with those of earlier periods.

From the 13th century until the rise of the industry in Sheffield at the beginning of the 16th century it was one of the most prosperous towns in Essex and a centre for the manufacture of cutlery – now only reflected in the name of the hamlet of Cutlers Green, west of the town. After that date the prosperity of the town depended mainly on the wool trade and the associated weaving industry. The population has remained remarkably constant since the early 19th Century at around 2,500 and it remains a thriving and vibrant community. There is a market every Friday from 7am to 2pm.



Thaxted's crowning glory is the beautiful church of St John the Baptist, St Mary and St Laurence, standing on a rise above the town. At 183 feet long and 87 feet wide (56 metres by 26 metres) it is acknowledged by many as the finest parish church in England. Begun in 1340 and completed in 1510 with its aisles and transepts, it is often referred to as the Cathedral of Essex. It is only fair to note that the same is also said of Saffron Walden's church!

The church roof is early 16th century while the hexagonal pulpit dates to 1680. The chancel is flanked by two side chapels, the left hand one, the Becket Chapel, being dedicated to St Thomas. The chapel in the south transept is dedicated to St Catherine of Alexandria whose martyrdom is commemorated by the Catherine Wheel firework. The great star shaped candelabra, the Stellar, hanging at the crossing has been in the church since 1910. Its 42 lights represent the number of generations from Abraham to the birth of Christ while the ball below symbolises the world. Eight bells hang in the west Tower, the tenor weighing 15 cwt (760 kg). With the wind in the right direction the 'ring' can be heard in Great Dunmow – 7 miles away. The magnificent 181 ft (55 metre) spire is sometimes said to be the only medieval stone spire in Essex, albeit that it has been destroyed by lightning and rebuilt to the original design on two occasions. There are two organs, the older of which, the Lincoln Organ built by Henry Lincoln in 1820 and situated in the church since 1858, is the subject of an ongoing repair project.

Perhaps the most famous incumbent during the church's long history was Conrad Noel (1869-1942), known as 'The Red Vicar of Thaxted'. He was appointed to the parish in 1910 by the local landowner, the Countess of Warwick, a confirmed socialist, and he, sharing her views, presumably fulfilled her intention to appoint someone who would challenge conventional thinking both political and religious. His views were certainly not to the taste of many of his parishioners but few doubted his sincerity or charisma. His most provocative gesture was to hang a red flag together with the flag of Sinn Fein inside the church at the height of the struggle for Irish Home Rule. This led to the 'Battle of the Flags', groups of students coming from Cambridge to tear down the flags and do street battle with Noel's supporters. Questions were asked in Parliament and eventually a Church of England consistory court was convened. The Court ruled that the flag flying should stop, and Noel obeyed.

After the church the next most prominent building is the beautifully preserved, but probably misnamed, Guildhall which dominates the centre of the town. It was thought for many years to have been built by the Guild of Cutlers in the 14th century but more recent wisdom, not least from tree ring analysis of the timbers, dates it to the mid-15th century. Indeed, it is now thought to be doubtful whether such a Guild existed at that time but it is likely that much of the finance for the building came from the local industry. The apparent misnomer stems from this apparent error as to its origins. Its form is much more in keeping with a moote hall, or civic meeting place, than a guildhall. The town had been granted a charter in the 16th century by Queen Mary and became a borough with a mayor and 24 burgesses. It is thought that they met here. In 1686 the Charter was suppressed by James II and the building fell into disuse and disrepair. It received a second lease of life at the end of the 17th century when it was renovated to house the Yardley's Charity school which became a grammar school in which 30 boys and later 20 girls were educated until 1878. The most recent major renovation was in 1975 and, reflecting its position, the building continues to occupy a central place in the life of the town and is in daily use housing the parish council and other local bodies together with various exhibitions and other events.



A short walk from the church, a further notable building is John Webb's windmill, built in 1804. It operated commercially until 1907 when it fell into disuse and disrepair, only used briefly as a meeting house for scouts in the 1930s. In the 1970s the local community formed a trust for its renovation and by 1991 it had been returned to full working condition. It is normally open free to the public on weekend afternoons from Easter to October.



There are many other historical and attractive buildings to draw the eye in the town. Clarence House, shown below, stands opposite the church and is a fine example of a Queen Anne building. After its original residential use, it served variously as a doctor's surgery, an educational centre for children and adults and the town library before becoming a private house once again in 2015.



Close by in Stoney Lane near the Guildhall is Dick Turpin's House, but alas the evidence that he ever lived here or indeed in the town at all is minimal. Nonetheless, the row of Grade-I listed houses, built around 1410, is a magnificent spectacle.

There is no doubt that the celebrated composer Gustav Holst did live in Thaxted. The cottage in the hamlet of Monk Street, south of the town, in which he worked on his orchestral suite *The Planets*, was destroyed by fire, so in 1917 he and his family moved into The Steps in Town Street. The house is coloured blue in the picture below. It is now marked by a blue plaque on the wall of what was Holst's music room. He composed many of his works there and was a friend and close associate of Conrad Noel, taking a keen interest in the church choir and playing the Lincoln organ. He also organised a number of music festivals in the town.



The pink house to the left of Holst's is another fine building, the 15th-century Recorder's House, said to be named after a previous owner, William Bendlowes, who was the first Recorder of Thaxted some 400 years ago. It is believed to have been built originally as a hunting lodge for King Edward IV.



Given its association with Holst, music has long been important in the life of the town. The composer himself instituted a music festival in 1916 with the help and encouragement of Conrad Noel. The modern Festival was started in 1980 and the present pattern of performances on four summer weekends in June and July dates from 1987. Most concerts are held in the church (see link below).



Thaxted can also claim to be home to the oldest continuous team or 'side' of Morris dancers. It was founded in 1911 on the initiative of Conrad Noel as part of the reawakening of interest in Morris dancing begun by Cecil Sharp and others. Thaxted Morris is the oldest revival side in the

country. One of their first public performances was for the local celebrations of the coronation of King George V in 1911. Thaxted Morris Men hosted the meeting at which the Morris Ring was formed as a national organisation in 1934; and they continue to host one of the Morris Ring meetings every year. They also continue, as they have for over 80 years, to perform regularly at various venues both locally and around the country. New recruits, both dancers and musicians, are welcomed (see link below).

Southwest from the church is Borough Farmhouse, believed to date from the 14th century. It is pictured here on the right.

Not all Thaxted parish's fine buildings are within the town. A mile north, Prouds Farm, shown below, also dates from the 14th century. It stands beside Walden Road, the B184.



South of the town and half within the parish of Thaxted (the property straddles the parish boundary with Broxted) is Horham Hall, a fine Tudor brick, moated manor house. It was built mostly in the early 16th century by Sir John Cutte, Henry VIII's household treasurer, incorporating elements of an earlier and more extensive house. Queen Elizabeth I visited in 1571 and 1578. The Hall was used as a Barnardo's home during World War II. It is listed as Grade I and is a private residence.



Additional resources and sources of information

Hospitality:

Car Park and public toilets: Margaret Street, CM6 2QN

Tourist Information Centre, 7 Town Street, CM6 2LD (limited opening) 01371 831641 –

<https://www.thaxted.co.uk/index.php/tourism/thaxted-tourist-community-information-centre>

Farmhouse Inn, Monk Street, CM6 2NR – 01371 830864 – <https://www.farmhouseinn.org/>

India Villa, CM6 2PE – 01371 831205 - <https://www.indiavilladunmow.co.uk/>

Maypole, CM6 2LT – 01371 831599 - <https://www.maypolethaxted.com/>

Parrishes Restaurant and Bar, CM6 2LA – 01371 830482 – www.parrishes.co.uk

Swan Hotel, CM6 2PL – 01371 830321 –

<https://www.greenekinginns.co.uk/hotels/swan-hotel-thaxted/>

The Star Restaurant – 01371 238118 - <https://www.thaxtedstar.com/>

Totmans Farm B&B, Dunmow Road, CM6 2LU – 01371 830233 –

<http://thaxtedandstanstedbandb.co.uk/index.html>

Adjacent parishes:

Broxted, Debden, Wimbish, the Sampfords, Little Bardfield, Lindsell, Great Easton & Tilty.

Hundred Parishes Society walks include . . .

Circular walk 107 covers 2 miles around the town.

Circular walk 170 covers 6 miles, starting from Duton Hill. It visits Monk Street, so the route could be joined there at page 4 of the route description.

Links:

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

Thaxted Music Festival: <https://www.thaxtedfestival.co.uk/>

Thaxted Morris Men: <http://thaxtedmorris.org/>

Thaxted Windmill: <https://www.thaxted.co.uk/index.php/tourism/places-to-visit/the-windmill>

History: www.recordingtuttlesfordhistory.org.uk/thaxted/thaxted.html

Pre-War film of harvest time and Conrad Noel: <http://eafa.org.uk/work/?id=2292>

1961 film: <https://www.britishpathe.com/video/village-observatory/query/thaxted>

Further reading (many available for purchase in the church):

A Short Historical Guide to the Ancient Town of Thaxted, Mark Arman.

An Historical Guide and Brief Tour of the Ancient Town of Thaxted, Thaxted Parish Council.

Thaxted Guildhall, Mark Arman.

John Webb's 1804 Windmill, Thaxted, Mark Arman.

Thaxted and its Church in Old Postcards, Ken Baker.

The Thaxted Branch, Peter Paye.