



# The Hundred Parishes

## An introductory article about RAILWAYS

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Our website, [www.hundredparishes.org.uk](http://www.hundredparishes.org.uk) includes 21 walks that start and finish at a station on the railway line from London Liverpool Street to Cambridge or on the spur to Hertford East. Altogether, these walk routes start or finish at a total of eleven railway stations, including four just outside the Hundred Parishes: Harlow Town, Bishop's Stortford, Ware and Whittlesford Parkway. The seven passenger stations operating within the Hundred Parishes are as follows: Sawbridgeworth, Stansted Mountfitchet, Elsenham, Newport, Audley End, Great Chesterford and St Margarets.

Our local railway lines were constructed in the 1840s, built and operated by a series of private companies until they were nationalized as British Railways in 1948. The railways were privatized in the 1990s and our lines are now operated as part of the Greater Anglia franchise. Freight and passenger services were hauled by steam engines for over 100 years, being replaced by diesel engines and then by electric-powered locomotives. Below is a photo of a steam train at Saffron Walden Station, probably in the 1950s.



Until the 1960s, there would have been far greater scope for walks between stations. Then, more than twenty of our parishes had a railway station, compared with just seven today. Although some services closed earlier, the main spate of line closures followed the recommendations of British Rail's chairman, Dr Richard Beeching, in 1963. A third of Britain's rail track was deemed uneconomic because passengers and freight were migrating from rail to road. It may be hard for younger people today to imagine that before the 1960s only one household in ten had a car.

Our area was particularly affected by these rail closures . . .

In the north of The Hundred Parishes, the loss of the line from Cambridge to Haverhill meant the closure of stations at Linton and Bartlow. A branch line from Audley End Station had served Saffron Walden and Ashdon before meeting the Cambridge - Haverhill line at Bartlow.

In the west, the Buntingford branch line ran north from St Margarets Station (actually in Great Amwell parish) with stations at Mardock (in Wareside), Widford, Much Hadham, Standon, Braughing, Westmill and Buntingford.

In the east, the line between Bishop's Stortford and Braintree included stops at Stane Street and Takeley (both within Takeley parish), Easton Lodge (in Little Canfield), Dunmow and Felsted. Passenger services ended in 1952; freight continued until 1971.

The line closures in the 1960s followed that in the 1950s of the branch line that had run from Elsenham to serve Henham, Sibleys (for Chickney and Broxted) and Thaxted.

A much earlier closure was the branch line from Great Chesterford to Newmarket. It had opened in 1848 but proved uneconomic and closed after only three years.

The loss of so many stations probably constrained industrial and residential development in this area and thereby helped the Hundred Parishes to retain its rural characteristics.

Whilst the rails have been removed, significant sections of the routes are still visible on maps and on the ground - even parts of the Great Chesterford line that closed in 1851.

Part of the route between Bishop's Stortford and Braintree was repurposed as the Great Dunmow bypass – now itself bypassed. Much of the trackway found new life as the Flitch Way, a traffic-free route for people on foot, cycle or horseback. The photo below was taken along what is still called the Dunmow Cutting.



Several of the Hundred Parishes walk routes use part of the Fitch Way: for example numbers 158 and 159 starting from Takeley and 171 from Great Hallingbury, while 134 from Little Dunmow crosses it.

The route of the Buntingford branch line is still apparent in many places and features in several walks: numbers 20, 105, 124 and 168. The view below of the restored Braughing Station, now a private house with unusual garden furniture, can be seen from walk 105.



Further south, in Wareside, walk 124 passes an old signal box that was moved from beside the Buntingford Line into a private garden.



In the north of the Hundred Parishes, walks 109, 114 and 174 touch upon elements of the Stour Valley Railway that once ran through Linton and Bartlow.

The old postcard view on the right shows where the railway once crossed over the road heading south from Linton towards Saffron Walden. The bridge has gone but the embankments on either side are just visible.



Not far away, the former Linton Station survives. It is pictured below on the left, with Bartlow's former station pictured on the right. Bartlow's heritage lives on in the name of the house: The Booking Office.



Below on the left is the former level crossing keeper's house at Easton Lodge Halt in Little Canfield; Takeley Station House is shown on the right.





Several Hundred Parishes walk routes start or finish at Audley End Station, shown here. It is in the parish of Wendens Ambo. Originally, it went by the parish name but it was soon changed to reflect the fact that this was the closest station to Audley End House, a mile or so up the road.

The canopy was installed so that passengers from Audley End House could alight from their horse-drawn carriages under its shelter.

Today's passengers might be heading for Audley End miniature railway, a fun experience for young and old, close to Audley End House.



Walk 150 passes the former railway carriage that served for 50 years as a passenger waiting room at Ashdon Halt on the former line between Audley End and Bartlow. A Halt was not a scheduled station, but trains would halt if flagged down by a waiting customer.

The railway carriage was originally put into service in 1883. The line closed in 1964 after 99 years of service.

The route of the former line between Elsenham and Thaxted is followed for some distance soon after the start of walk number 5 from Elsenham Station.

The photo below is of the level crossing next to Elsenham Station. It is one of several that survive within the Hundred Parishes. Tragically, two teenage girls were killed here by a train in 2005. A number of our walks use pedestrian level crossings, sometimes in remote locations. You are reminded to always obey signals and to take great care.



Each of the walk routes mentioned in this article can be downloaded from [www.hundredparishes.org.uk](http://www.hundredparishes.org.uk)

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Any comments or suggestions for improvement may be submitted by using the Feedback form on the website. The website has many short articles on various aspects of The Hundred Parishes, as well as introductions to individual parishes and to a number of local celebrities, and an extensive What's On section. More than a hundred walk route descriptions can be freely downloaded, with each of the hundred parishes featuring in at least one walk.