



The Hundred Parishes

An introductory article about SIGNPOSTS

It is easy to take for granted the helpful signposts to be found at many of our road junctions, yet they are part of our culture and heritage and merit further investigation.

Early road signs were erected by cycling and then motoring organisations as ordinary people began to enjoy the freedom afforded by ownership of a bicycle or motor car. Standards for signage on main roads were redefined in the 1960s to satisfy faster traffic and night visibility. Fingerposts that indicate direction and distance from rural junctions frequently pre-date those regulations. The 1964 regulations prohibited the erection of new fingerpost signs but this was subsequently relaxed. New fingerpost signs may now be erected at junctions where neither road is an A or B road. The one shown here seems to be an exception, erected beside the B1039 in 1993.



Fingerposts, with arms pointing in several directions, are white with black lettering, and generally made of wood or iron. Many local examples, some almost 100 years old, were made of iron in Essex at Maldon Iron Works. The manufacturer's name can often be seen towards the bottom of the post or on one of the arms, albeit now often obscured by many layers of paint.

Maldon Iron Works operated from around 1870 until the 1950s, also manufacturing farm machinery. The building still stands and is now in multiple occupancy including a gym.



Amidst our many rural signposts, there are a good number of curiosities and anomalies.



A fingerpost at Matching Green indicates the mileage to London – precisely 26¼.

Another, at the northern end of High Roding and shown below, points to Takeley Station which closed 60 years ago.

Two signs have an alternative spelling for Chishill. On the B1039 between Chrishall and Great Chishill, a finger, pictured below, points towards Great Chishill but proclaims GREAT CHISHALL. This was correct until 1929 when the name was changed to Great Chishill. On the other hand,



the sign in Langley Lower Green outside The Bull pub points to LITTLE CHISHALL which has always been Little Chishill.



A Henham sign, pictured on the right, unusually points the way to a local pub, Ugley Chequers - which closed in 2020.



This and all other signposts were removed for the duration of WWII lest they should aid the enemy.

Some signs at T-junctions have information on the back, albeit hidden from view (for example in High Roding at the junction near the church).

Usually, the hidden information is consistent with the side that is visible - but that is not always the case: the southerly finger of a sign on the B1051 in Broxted (opposite the turning for Chaureth Green) points to Broxted and Bps Stortford, but the back reveals that it has been recycled and once pointed to Wimbish Green. Such quirks are popular with those who compile challenging questions for map-reading contests and treasure hunts!

In 2005 the Department for Transport published a 6-page *Traffic Advisory Leaflet* about Traditional Direction Signs. The leaflet can be downloaded from <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120606210729/http://assets.dft.gov.uk/publications/tal-6-05/tal-6-05.pdf>.

The leaflet gives some historic background but explains that fingerposts will not normally qualify for listed status because of their removal during WWII and the regular renewal of their component parts. That last point is illustrated below. The signpost outside Elmdon Church has two mature arms on which it is just possible to see the raised Maldon Iron Works badge and one replacement arm in a different font, pointing towards Chrishall and Heydon.



The DFT leaflet goes on to say “Nonetheless they make a major contribution to the historic environment and warrant every effort being made to retain them”. It encourages the inclusion in local development plans, village design statements, parish plans, etc of policies for repair and replacement of these and other examples of historic street furniture. Hear, hear!

In 2021, Uttlesford District Council’s Local Heritage Lists included a dozen fingerposts (usually referred to as signpost or directional sign), selected for their rarity and aesthetic value. It may be appropriate for others to be nominated for local recognition in Uttlesford and other districts.

At Clanver End in the parish of Wendens Ambo, the heritage sign has been retained beside the road junction, albeit overshadowed by one that is far easier to read from a distance. What the new sign does not tell us is that it is precisely 40½ to London.



At Rickling Green, a Maldon Iron Works sign pointing towards Manuden stands only about three feet tall.

Several thousand photos of finger posts have been contributed to the Flickr group, Finger Posts UK which can be accessed from <https://www.flickr.com/groups/816856@N21/>

As you travel along the lanes, please take time for a second look at our humble, ancient fingerposts.

You may also like to read our separate articles on Roads and Milestones.



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