



The Hundred Parishes

An introduction to

DEBDEN



Location: 3 miles south of Saffron Walden. **Ordnance Survey grid square:** TL5533.
Postcode: CB11 3LW. **County:** Essex. **District:** Uttlesford. **Access:** well off main roads.
Bus: 316 (Mon to Sat) between Saffron Walden, Thaxted and Stansted Airport.
Population: 753 in 2001, 778 in 2011, 790 in 2021.



The name Debden is derived from a Saxon word meaning deep valley. The Domesday Book of 1086 records it as *Depeduna*, while the most common spelling was *Depden* until around 200 years ago when the name became settled as Debden.

After the Norman Conquest, Debden was given to Ralph Peverill and it passed down to succeeding generations including a grandson who fled the country after murdering the Earl of Chester in 1153. The Debden estate passed to King Henry II and then through generations of royalty and aristocracy. In 1715 the estate was acquired by Richard Chiswell, a wealthy London merchant who subsequently became a director of the Bank of England.

The Chiswells were prominent in the affairs of Debden for 150 years, progressively acquiring land so that their Debden estate eventually grew to around 5,000 acres (8 square miles or 2,000

hectares). Debden Hall was built close to the church in 1791, a large and handsome mansion in Grecian style with stately pillars, surrounded by extensive parkland.

Debden Hall was sold in the 19th century to William Fuller Maitland of Stansted Mountfitchet, and sold again before the First World War to the unusually titled Lord Strathcona and Mount Royal. The later owners found the Hall expensive to maintain so it was demolished and the estate broken up and disposed of in the 1930s.

Little remains of its parkland apart from Debden Water, seen here from the public path a short distance beyond the church.



Today the parish of Debden covers a wide area of farmland and woodland, with the main village of Debden near the centre, the hamlets of Debden Green and Hamperden End in the southeast and a wide scattering of farmhouses and farm buildings.

The main village is clustered around the school, village hall and pond. The Parish Church of St Mary and All Saints has a Grade I listing and lies down a narrow lane 400 metres west of the centre.

The church dates from the 13th century and is built of rubble and flint. Much of what is visible today came from subsequent alterations and additions including 18th-century brickwork. The church once had a central tower with five bells, but it fell down in 1698 - not an uncommon occurrence! A new steeple for one bell was constructed in 1786 and further work at that time included the addition of the "battlements" which are now such an unusual and prominent feature all around the church. The 1786 steeple was replaced by the present one in 1930 with the height decreased and the width increased to ensure firm foundations. It houses two bells. Just below the bell tower there is a circular space which was once filled by a clock that celebrated Queen Victoria's golden jubilee in 1887. Some years ago the clock was relocated to the front of the village school where it is seen more often.



The Chiswell family was a major contributor towards the cost of the 18th-century works.

Within the octagonal chapel, which they added at the east end of the church, there are several memorials to members of the Chiswell family, especially to RMT Chiswell. He was the third Richard Chiswell to own the estate. He lost much of the family fortune through speculative investments in the West Indies and committed suicide in 1797.

A distant view of the church can sometimes be enjoyed from the footpath that passes through Cabbage Wood, southwest of the church.



Debden village is surrounded by rich agricultural land. Local farming families have owned small to medium-sized holdings for many years. The parish is rich in listed buildings with a rural heritage. Pictured below are two timber-framed and plastered farmhouses in the Debden Green area: 16th-century Wieldbarns Farmhouse on the left and 17th-century Barnards Farmhouse on the right.



The parish retains many of its older buildings, some with thatched roofs, although twelve houses in the centre of the village were destroyed in the Great Fire of Debden in 1907.

Debden has a thriving primary school as well as a range of social activities. It has several societies and clubs including a local history group and a successful football team.

Debden has a strong community spirit typified by past success in Village of the Year and Best Kept Village competitions.

Until about 2020, Debden had a community-run shop and post office beside the village pond. When it opened in 1982, it was the first community shop in Essex. It still provides post office services.

Shown on the right is the previous shop, taken from an old postcard. The building, in Deynes Road, survives and is pictured more recently below on the right. Although not apparent, part of it dates back to the 15th century.



Deynes Road is a small section of the long-distance Harcamlow Way trail which winds roughly from west to east across the parish. About half a mile further east, it passes through Rowney Wood. This is an ancient wood, now owned by the Forestry Commission. It covers 85 hectares and has a wealth of plant and tree species and wildlife.

The footpath is part of Debden's network of public paths, some of which are used in the various Hundred Parishes walk routes listed at the end of this parish introduction.



One footpath that does not feature in a Hundred Parishes route passes through Howe Wood, heading north towards Saffron Walden. In the heart of the wood is an unusual milestone. Its origin is unknown and the inscription is no longer visible. It is similar in design to another milestone that stands beside the crossroads north of Debden village and pictured on the right. Just legible at the top is information that it stands 39 miles from London.



One of the Hundred Parishes walk routes goes beside thatched Rook End Cottage, believed to have been built in 1580 AD and shown on the left.

Debden and the neighbouring parish of Wimbish are twinned with the village of Tang Ting in Nepal. Debden has a close association with the Engineer regiments based at Carver Barracks which lies just over the parish boundary in Wimbish. The barracks are on what was formerly RAF Debden, a key Fighter Command base in the Second World War.

A few miles south, the very tall microwave communications tower at Sibleys, on the southern parish border, was constructed during the Cold War of the 1960s. It is pictured below.

Finally, a couple more images of 18th-century houses near the centre of Debden village: Causeway Cottage on the left and Old Ship Cottages on the right, formerly the Ship Inn.



MORE INFORMATION ABOUT DEBDEN

Hospitality:

Plough – 01799 541899 - <https://theploughatdebden.co.uk/>

Hundred Parishes Society walks include . . .

Circular walk 175 which covers 3.1 miles, entirely in Debden parish

Circular walk 185 which covers 5.4 miles, mostly in Debden but some Widdington

Other walks that pass through some of Debden parish are:

Circular walk 106 which covers 7 miles starting in Henham, Station walk 015 - 5 miles from Newport Station to Audley End Station,

Station walk 016 - 7 miles from Newport Station to Audley End Station,

Adjacent parishes:

Henham, Widdington, Newport, Saffron Walden, Wimbish, Thaxted, Broxton, Chickney.

Links:

Parish Council: <https://www.debden-pc.gov.uk/>

Parish church: <https://www.achurchnearyou.com/church/6275/>

RAF Debden history: www.controltowers.co.uk/D/Debden.htm

Parish history: <https://www.debdenhistory.org/> and www.recordingtuttlesfordhistory.org.uk/debden/debdentemplate.html

