



# The Hundred Parishes

## An introduction to **BRENT PELHAM & MEESDEN**



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**Location:** 5 miles east of Buntingford. **Ordnance Survey grid square:** TL4330.

**Postcode:** SG9 0HW. **Access:** B1038.

**Buses:** 20 (Monday to Friday) to Bishop's Stortford and 27 (Monday & Wednesday) to Royston.

**County:** Hertfordshire. **District:** East Herts. **Population:** 289 in 2001, 295 in 2011, 320 in 2021.

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The Domesday Book of 1086 refers to just one Pelham, but by 1300 there were three adjacent Pelhams on Hertfordshire's border with Essex: Brent Pelham in the north, Furneux Pelham in the south and Stocking Pelham in between. The name Pelham may originally have meant the homestead of a man called Peola, while Brent Pelham is apparently a corruption of the name *Burnt Pelham* which this settlement acquired after most of it was destroyed by a fire in the 12th century. Brent Pelham merged some years ago with the adjacent parish of Meesden to form a single administrative parish, each electing half of the members of the joint council.

Those approaching Brent Pelham from the west are greeted by this attractive skyline, with the parish church on the hill top.



Each of the three Pelhams has a parish church dedicated to St Mary – and so too does Meesden.

Brent Pelham's parish church, pictured on the right, dates from the 14th century.

Inside, one monument is particularly noteworthy: built into a wall is the tomb of Piers Shonks, the dragon slayer.



The carved marble top of Piers Shonks's tomb is thought to date from either the 13th or 14th century. It was apparently in the 11th century that Shonks encountered the dragon, killing it with an arrow. However, this particular dragon was the favourite of the Devil, who swore that he would have Shonks's soul when he died, whether he was buried inside or outside the church.

Later, shortly before his death, Shonks fired an arrow to determine where he should be buried. It flew through a window into the church and embedded itself in the wall. Shonks was duly buried in the wall, thereby cheating the devil as he was neither inside nor outside the church. This tale is related in the church and on the website of East Herts District Council so it must surely be true.

There is much of interest close by Brent Pelham Church. For at least a hundred years, there has been a set of stocks and whipping post just outside the gate. The photo on the right was taken a few years ago before the current set was installed.

Just across the road, the village hall hosts community events. The parish war memorial stands nearby on a small green traffic island, mounted on a base of Hertfordshire puddingstones.

Across the road from the war memorial is the entrance to Brent Pelham Hall, pictured below - a Grade I-listed building from the 16th and 17th century with a noted set of ornate chimneys.

Some of the Hall's internal fittings came originally from Beeches, a farmhouse of similar antiquity that was once the manor house.



Beeches (sometimes spelt Beaches), is pictured on the right. It stands about a mile to the East, set back from the B1038, and is notable for its three fine 17th-century chimney stacks.



Much of Brent Pelham is owned by members of the Barclay family. Their ancestor was a senior partner in Barclays Bank and he acquired Brent Pelham Hall and the surrounding estate in 1865.

In recent years, the Barclays have hosted the Herts and Essex Show which includes a range of rural activities and competitions including a spectacular display of heavy horses, some of which are being judged below. Those leaving the showground would pass one of the parish's more unusual listed buildings, a former windmill. It was constructed in 1826 and ceased operations in 1890. A water tank was installed on top and the wooden structure clad in corrugated iron.



Almost 2000 years ago, a typical straight Roman road, linking the military posts at Braughing and Chesterford, headed north-east through what is now Brent Pelham towards today's Meesden.

Today's road between the two parish churches follows this old route for about a third of a mile, passing close to two 16th-century properties pictured below – Westley Farm on the left and Black Hall on the right. The former lies in Meesden and the latter in Brent Pelham.



Meesden's St Mary's Church is the oldest place of worship in the combined parish, dating from the 12th century. It is rather isolated up an attractive tree-lined path.



Its unusual brick porch, shown in more detail on the right, was added around 1530 AD. Inside, a mosaic tiled floor in front of the altar is an exceptional survival from the early part of the 14th century.

Below is one of the oldest of the parish's 43 listed buildings: 15th-century Walkers Farmhouse in Meesden.



This scattered, rural parish seems to have more than its fair share of interesting heritage and photo opportunities.

Brent Pelham's pub, the Black Horse, dates from the 17th or 18th century. It is shown below on the right. To the left is its neighbour, 17th-century Bythorne Cottage.



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## MORE INFORMATION ABOUT BRENT PELHAM & MEESDEN

**Hospitality:** Black Horse pub, Brent Pelham: 01279 778925, [www.blackhorsebrentpelham.co.uk](http://www.blackhorsebrentpelham.co.uk)

**Hundred Parishes Society circular walks:**

142 (5.6 miles) around Brent Pelham and Meesden,

186 (5.6 miles) starting in Meesden and

143 (4.9 miles) from Berden with just a little in Brent Pelham.

Quiet lane walk 335 (6.3 miles) starting from Brent Pelham,

Quiet lane walk 305 (10 miles) includes part of Brent Pelham & Meesden,

Quiet lane walk 306 (10 miles) includes part of Brent Pelham & Meesden.

**Adjacent parishes:** Stocking Pelham, Furneux Pelham, Hormead, Anstey, Nuthampstead, Langley, Clavering, Berden.

**Links:**

Parish Council: [www.brentpelham-meesden-pc.org](http://www.brentpelham-meesden-pc.org)

Piers Shonks story: [https://www.hertsmemories.org.uk/content/herts-history/towns-and-villages/brent\\_pelham/piers-shonks-hertfordshire-dragon-slayer](https://www.hertsmemories.org.uk/content/herts-history/towns-and-villages/brent_pelham/piers-shonks-hertfordshire-dragon-slayer)

Piers Shonks in-depth: "Hollow Places", a 400-page paperback book by Christopher Hadley - <https://christopherhadley.co.uk/hollow-places>

Hertfordshire Genealogy:

[www.hertfordshire-genealogy.co.uk/data/places/places-b/brent-pelham/brent-pelham.htm](http://www.hertfordshire-genealogy.co.uk/data/places/places-b/brent-pelham/brent-pelham.htm)

[www.hertfordshire-genealogy.co.uk/data/places/places-m/meesden/meesden.htm](http://www.hertfordshire-genealogy.co.uk/data/places/places-m/meesden/meesden.htm)

Barclay family history: <https://landedfamilies.blogspot.com/2019/03/369-barclay-of-youngsbury-knotts-green.html>

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