



The Hundred Parishes

An introduction to

ASHDON



Location: 5 miles northeast of Saffron Walden. **Ordnance Survey grid square:** TL5842.

Postcode: CB10 2HB. **County:** Essex. **District:** Uttlesford. **Access:** well off main roads.

Bus: 319 (Mon – Sat) between Audley End Station, Saffron Walden and Haverhill.

Population: 792 in 2001, 893 in 2011, 900 in 2021.

Ashdon takes its name from two Saxon words: *aescun* meaning ash tree and *dun* meaning hill. It was recorded as *Ascenduna* in the Domesday Book of 1086. The parish is large in area with three main settlements: the oldest, Church End, clustered around the parish church at the top of the hill, today's centre down in the valley of the River Bourn, and the third main element at Steventon End. There is much open, rolling farmland with scattered settlements and lots of footpaths. The Bourn is a tributary of the Granta which joins the Cam before reaching Cambridge.



The Parish Church of All Saints dates mostly from the 14th and 15th centuries, while much of the outside was renewed in the 18th and 19th.

The church has a Grade I listing, taking pride of place at the head of 65 listed buildings spread throughout the parish.

The photo below, taken from the churchyard, shows the 15th-century Guildhall on the left and the 18th-century Old Vicarage on the right. The Guildhall probably served as a church building before becoming the parish workhouse in 1775 for up to 30 inmates. Sixty years later it was converted into three cottages and later into the single private house it is today.



To the east of the church, an area of pasture is protected as a Scheduled Ancient Monument. Archaeological evidence confirms that this was the site of a medieval settlement, while the discovery in the 1830s of burials with weapons and pottery suggests that Church End was settled even earlier, long before the present church was built, possibly in Anglo-Saxon times over a thousand years ago. In the year 1016 King Canute's Danish army secured a decisive victory over the English at the Battle of Assandun, and later Canute built a minster church at Icanho to honour those who had died in the battle. The site of this battle and minster are not known for certain, but Ashdon is a possibility for the battle and either Ashdon's Church End or nearby Hadstock are possible sites for the minster. Ashington in southeast Essex is another possibility.

Close to the church stands the former National School, pictured on the right. It opened in 1841 and closed in 1885, seven years after the Board School opened in the centre of Ashdon.



Many of Ashdon's listed buildings are former farmhouses or barns, some of which are now purely residential. The parish comprises mainly arable farmland which today requires few farm workers.

From Church End there is a segregated footpath that follows the roadway downhill to today's village centre.

The path rejoins the road opposite Ashdon's village museum. Opening hours are limited – see the link below - but this small building is packed with a superb display of local and general history – a veritable Aladdin's Cave - with the added attraction of its own small tea room. The museum has been developed and is staffed by an enthusiastic band of volunteers. Their usually cheery demeanour has been tested several times by the adjacent River Bourn, whose waters have flooded through the museum on more than one occasion. It is to be hoped that remedial works in recent years will prevent or mitigate any further flooding. Two internal views are shown below.



Beside the road junction in the centre of Ashdon, the public house dates from the 16th or 17th century.

The Rose and Crown was originally a coaching inn and it is possible that Oliver Cromwell stayed here.

The Cromwell Room has 17th-century patterned wall painting, albeit in poor condition.



Looking out from the pub, the scene has changed little from the view shown on the right. It appeared on a postcard sent in 1908.



Close by are the Baptist church, built in 1835, the current primary school which dates from 1878, the war memorial and a well-used village hall.

Shown below are the red-brick Baptist church and the thatched village hall.



Across the road from the village hall, thatched 18th-century Archers retains its shop window. Until his death in 1916, this was the shop and workshop of Levi Archer who made saddles and harnesses for horses.



In 1914 Ashdon was a focal point in the Agricultural Strike which gripped this area of Essex, Cambridgeshire and Suffolk in the spring and summer leading up to the First World War.

In all, around 800 farm workers withdrew their labour, seeking recognition of their trade union and improvement in their poor employment conditions. There were several hostile confrontations between strikers and farmers and a force of 70 police was stationed at the Rose & Crown. Eight Ashdon men were sent to prison and were widely regarded as heroes.

The dispute was eventually settled and most of the union demands were met. The strike ended just as war broke out, with many of the farm labourers then going off to war. Twenty-four men from Ashdon died in WWI. Most are recorded on the war memorial, although the names of three brothers, Albert, Frederick and Erasmus Kent, were not inscribed at the request of their parents.

Much of Ashdon is strung out along the road that meanders between Saffron Walden and Bartlow. For 99 years – between 1865 and 1964 - a railway line also connected these places, following a flatter and more direct route. Three miles (5 kilometres) of the Saffron Walden branch line passed through Ashdon parish, albeit not very close to its centres of population. At its peak the weekday service comprised eight steam trains each way, but it was not until 1911 that Ashdon had its own station. From that date trains would stop upon request at Ashdon Halt, an unmanned platform.



The line has gone but Ashdon's "waiting room" survives, just about, and is pictured on the left. It started life in 1883 as a railway carriage and was installed at Ashdon Halt in 1915.

Ashdon's undulating countryside is criss-crossed by an extensive network of public rights of way. The long-distance Harcamlow Way footpath traverses the parish, passing the former Ashdon Halt and many other landmarks.

Near Steventon End, the Harcamlow Way goes past several grand buildings including 16th-century Place Farm Farmhouse, shown on the right, and 17th-century brick-built Walton Cottages, immediately below.



The Harcamlow Way also passes Ashdon's 18th-century post mill, pictured below.



The mill was last used in 1910. An extensive programme of work has made it once again accessible and a striking landmark.

Pictured below is a selection of the varied architecture that can be seen around the parish, either beside a road or alongside one of the many bridleways and footpaths.



Mention is made within this introduction of only a few of the fine buildings situated in the two conservation areas (Church End and the village centre) and elsewhere around the parish. Ashdon's story is covered extensively in a number of publications and websites that are listed below, as well as in its excellent museum. It is hoped that this introduction will encourage its readers to learn more.



MORE INFORMATION ABOUT ASHDON

Hospitality:

Rose & Crown, CB10 2HA (Weds to Sun) – 01799 584414 - <https://roseandcrownashdon.co.uk/>

Hundred Parishes Walk:

Circular walk number 150 covers 6.5 miles around much of the parish.

Adjacent parishes:

Saffron Walden, Swards End, Radwinter, Hadstock, Castle Camps, Bartlow.

Links:

Parish Council: <https://www.ashdonparishcouncil.gov.uk/>

Ashdon Village Museum: www.ashdonvillagemuseum.co.uk

All Saints Parish Church: <https://www.allsaintsashdon.org.uk/>

Ashdon Baptist Church: <https://ashdonbaptistchurch.co.uk/>

Ashdon Neighbourhood Plan: <https://www.ashdonplan.co.uk/>

Further reading:

Ashdon, A History of an Essex Village, written and published by Angela Green.

Annals of Ashdon: No Ordinary Village, Robert Gibson, 1988, Essex Record Office.

Five miles from Bunkum – a Village and its crafts, Christopher Ketteridge and Spike Mays, 1972, published by Eyre Methuen.

Reuben's Corner, Spike Mays.

The Empty Fields, the Agricultural Strike of 1914, Roy Brazier, 1989, Ian Henry Publications

The Ashdon Meteorite, Gerald Lucy & Mike Howgate, 2023