



The Hundred Parishes

An introduction to

SAFFRON WALDEN



Location: 16 miles south of Cambridge. **Ordnance Survey grid square:** TL5338.

Postcode: CB10 1HR. **County:** Essex. **District:** Uttlesford. **Rail:** 2 miles from Audley End station on London Liverpool Street - Cambridge line. **Roads:** B184, B1052, B1053, B1383.

Buses include: 7 (regular, each day) between Saffron Walden and Cambridge; 301 (Mon – Sat) to Audley End Station and Bishop's Stortford; 313 (Mon – Sat) to Great Dunmow; 316 (Mon – Sat) to Stansted Airport; 319, 320 and 321 (Mon – Sat) between Audley End Stn and Haverhill; 59 and 590 (Mon – Fri) to Audley End Stn; 132 (Sundays only) to Cambridge.

Population: 14,606 in 2001, 15,504 in 2011, 17,000 in 2021.

Walden was already a large manor in 1086 when the Domesday Book recorded over 100 households. Now Saffron Walden is the largest settlement in the Hundred Parishes, with a population in excess of 15,000. It is a picturesque market town whose centre retains its medieval street pattern and includes many of the parish's 373 listed buildings which span the period since it was first granted permission to hold a market in 1141. It has a total of ten Grade I-listed buildings and its amenities include a hospital, museum, art gallery, community-run cinema and a world-class concert hall opened in 2013.

This introduction only scratches the surface of the parish's history, heritage and facilities. Its story has been written in many books.

Permission to hold a market was granted around the time when the castle and church were built on the hilltop site and nearby Walden Abbey was founded. Chipping (or chepying) was an old name for market, and this market town was known then as Chipping Walden. It prospered from its privilege of holding markets and from wool and weaving. Later in the Middle Ages, the town enjoyed success as England's main centre for growing the saffron crocus and for trading in saffron which was used for flavouring, medicine and as a yellow dye. The economic importance of this was recognised in a change of name to Saffron Walden. Saffron ceased to be grown here commercially in the 18th century.

Walden Castle was built in about 1125 by Geoffrey de Mandeville. It had a rather short life and was already neglected and part ruined by the 14th century. All that can be seen today are fragments of 12th-century rubble walls and a ruin of the 40 feet (13 metres) square keep.



Within the area of the Castle's inner bailey is Saffron Walden Museum, shown on the right, one of the oldest purpose-built museums in the country.



The Parish Church of St Mary probably stands on the site of its Norman predecessor. At nearly 60 metres long, it is the largest church in the Hundred Parishes (a little bigger than Thaxted) and possibly even the largest parish church in the whole of Essex and Hertfordshire. It is not only large, but rich in style. The present structure dates from the 13th century but was mostly rebuilt between 1450 and 1525. The 193 feet (59 metres) spire, a landmark over a wide area, was added in 1832.



Inside, the most elaborate monument (at the east end of the south aisle) is of black marble, to Thomas Audley (1488-1544). Its main decoration is shown below.



Thomas Audley served as Lord Chancellor under Henry VIII and was granted Walden Abbey during the dissolution of the monasteries. His grandson, Thomas Howard, 1st Earl of Suffolk, subsequently built Audley End House on the site of Walden Abbey.



This is the view of Audley End House today from the gardens at the rear of the mansion.



This is a better-known view, from the main road, the B1383. Audley End House stands beside the River Cam, in the valley about a mile from the town centre, while its estate comes right up to the town. It was built in the early 1600s and was the most palatial house in England. It was said by King James I to be “too large for a king, though it might suit a lord treasurer”. Thomas Howard was, indeed, the King’s treasurer – and in 1619 he was imprisoned for using public money to finance his personal extravagances! His family could not afford to maintain Audley End and it was sold in 1668 to Charles II.

In the 18th century, two thirds of the mansion was demolished in order to reduce the cost of upkeep. It is still a very large mansion and is now maintained by English Heritage. It is open to the public and its many visitors enjoy fine interiors and works of art, a splendid doll’s house and a large collection of stuffed birds, as well as fine gardens and parkland.

Opposite the entrance are a 1.5 mile-long miniature railway and play areas that are great attractions for families. During World War II Audley End was a centre for training Polish underground resistance soldiers before they were airlifted behind enemy lines. This photo captures these two aspects of the estate’s history: the miniature railway track passing a World War II pillbox.



The photo below was taken within the grounds of Audley End House – looking towards one of the bridges over the River Cam.





For 99 years, from 1865 to 1964, the town had its own railway station, on a branch line that ran between Audley End and Bartlow, but sadly it was closed as being uneconomic. The photo on the left dates from around 1950.

Audley End Station (actually in the parish of Wendens Ambo) is on the line between London Liverpool Street and Cambridge. It is about a mile from Audley End House and two miles from Saffron Walden town.

The central part of Saffron Walden is rich in historic houses and shops and both the main and side streets are architecturally pleasing. This area centres upon the Market Place where an outdoor market is held on Tuesdays and Saturdays. Buildings around the market square include the Town Hall and the Corn Exchange.

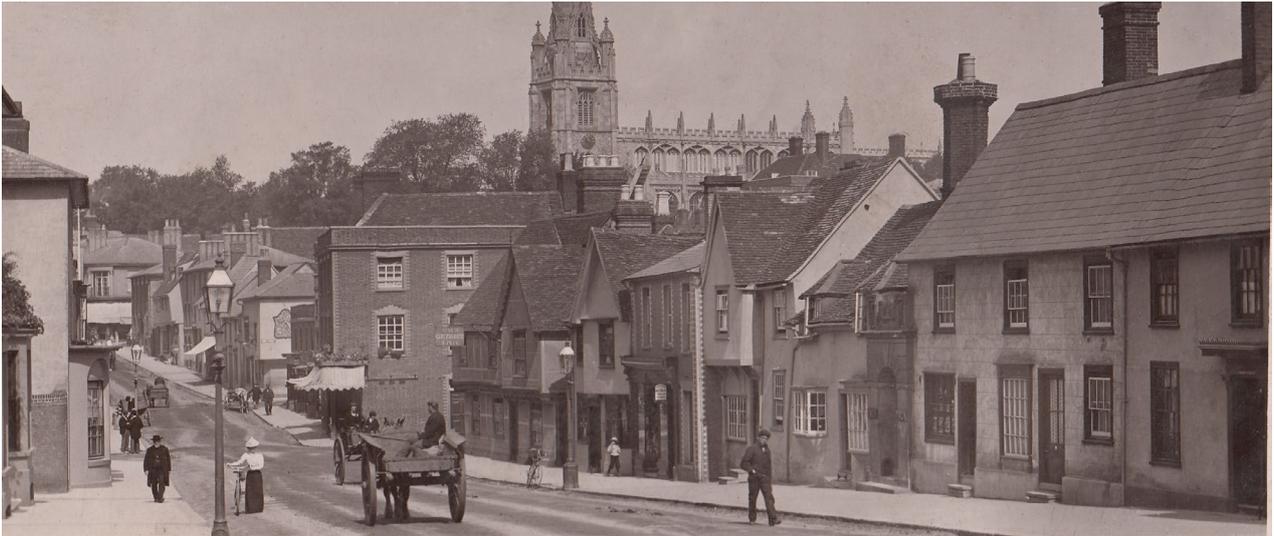
The Town Hall is of brick and dates from 1761. It was extended in 1879 with a half-timbered gable - shown on the right with performing Morris dancers. This building also houses the Saffron Walden Tourist Information Centre, regularly voted the best in Essex. If you are new to the town, this is a good place to start to discover what's on and where to go. Today, the town is more welcoming than in 1555 when John Newman from Kent was burnt at the stake – an event recorded on a plaque on the wall of the Town Hall.



The Corn Exchange, in an Italian style of design, dates from 1848 and currently accommodates the Library. It is pictured below. In the foreground, the ornate drinking fountain dates from 1862. The Market Place is also home to a series of bollards, each individually decorated.



The High Street is mostly of the late Georgian period and several of its houses are of the elegant design of that period. This is how it looked at the beginning of the 20th century.



The High Street leads north, past Myddylton Place with, at the corner, the former youth hostel building, pictured on the right. It is one of the best medieval houses in the town. Inside are features that date from the 16th century.



Just beyond, there are more attractive old houses in Bridge Street, shown below. Just out of view is one of Saffron Walden's 16th-century inns, the Eight Bells, with dolphins carved below the downstairs window.



Myddylton Place, beside the former youth hostel, is a cul-de-sac that leads to an area of retirement homes and sheltered accommodation including 18th-century Walden Place, pictured on the right. Walden Place served as a Red Cross hospital during the First World War.

Charming old houses are found in most of the side streets in the older part of the town.

The 18th century predominates in both Gold Street and High Street where the bulky blocks of former maltings are also a part of the scene.



At the corner of Market Hill and Church Street is the Old Sun Inn of 14th-century origin, pictured below. This is one of the oldest and best architectural points in the town. It has oversailing gables that project out beyond the floor below, and is richly adorned with 17th-century plasterwork including two giants and patterns of foliage, birds and other symbols. The owner gives occasional tours – see links to websites of this and other specific attractions at the end of this introduction.



In Mount Pleasant Road is one of the town's oldest scholastic establishments - the former Friends' School, a Quaker foundation that dates back to 1702 when it was founded in the Clerkenwell area of London. The move to Saffron Walden came in 1879 when the present buildings were erected of red brick in a Tudor style of architecture.

The independent school's success, with up to 300 pupils, came to a sudden end in 2017 when it closed, apparently unable to resolve financial difficulties. In 2026, the school building is being converted to some 50 apartments, with further residential development within the former school grounds.

A more modern and thriving school can be found in Audley End Road - the County High School which opened in 1953. This school has grown and grown and now incorporates Saffron Screen, a community-run cinema, and a separate world-class concert hall, Saffron Hall. They are both used at different times by either pupils or the general public. The entrance and Saffron Hall are each shown below.



Saffron Walden's lovely Bridge End Gardens can be approached from either Bridge Street or Castle Street. The Gardens were created in the 1840s by Francis Gibson, a member of the Quaker family that made a fortune from banking and brewing and then gave generously to the town. After a period of decline, the Gardens were restored and reopened in 2005 to provide an attractive oasis that is open to the public each day free of charge. The Gardens also include a hedge maze with limited opening hours (check timings with the Tourist Information Centre).



Between Bridge End Gardens and Castle Street is the Fry Art Gallery which opens seasonally (see website details below). It displays many works by well-known local artists including the late Edward Bawden and Eric Ravillious. With approval from his daughter, one of Eric Ravillious's wood engravings was adopted by The Hundred Parishes Society as its logo; it appears at the beginning of this introduction. The original engraving is held by the Fry Art Gallery.

The oldest of Saffron Walden's open spaces is the Common, on the east side of the town centre and flanked by late Georgian houses. It was a meadow on which the burgesses of former times - perhaps even back to the Saxon period - had grazing rights and it was used also for such events as tournaments.

Today the Common is a 14-acre open green with trees around its edge – and a host of golden daffodils along the upper perimeter in Spring.



On the eastern side of the Common is what is believed to be the largest earthen or turf maze in England. The date of origin is unknown, but it was here in 1699. It was re-cut several times in the 19th century and again in 1911. There is only one route to follow to reach the centre, so it is



sometimes referred to as a “labyrinth” rather than “maze”. The narrow path of bricks winds for about one mile through the turf within a circle 100 feet (30 metres) in diameter, eventually arriving at the central mound.



Saffron Walden is a town of many contrasts. On the left is one of its oldest features, a section of the “Battle Ditches” which were dug around the town in the early 13th century. They are explained on interpretation panels which have been installed at strategic locations.

Below is one of the town’s newest features, a statue by Ian Wolter called “The Children of Calais”. It was installed in 2018 next to the parish church. The piece is designed to provoke debate about children caught up in the current refugee crisis.



Shown on the right is the former Saffron Walden Hospital, opened in 1866 and now serving as offices for Uttlesford District Council.



Construction of the hospital was mainly funded by a bequest of £5,000 from Wyatt George Gibson. He was a leading member of the town's malting and banking family.

The former Gibson, Tuke & Gibson Bank is shown on the right.



In front of it, in Market Square, regiments from nearby Carver Barracks are parading, thereby exercising their right to freedom of the district of Uttlesford, an honour granted in perpetuity to several regiments over recent years.

In 1896, Gibson, Tuke & Gibson Bank was one of several that merged to create Barclays Bank. After more than a hundred years, Barclays vacated the building in 2022.

It now functions as a restaurant which has retained the finely decorated former banking hall which was part of the building's original design by Eden Nesfield.



Wyatt George Gibson lived near the northern end of the High Street in the 16th-century

house which is pictured on the right. Saffron Walden is a colourful town; some of its variety is shown on this page, starting with a view along Church Street on the right and one of Castle Street below.



The house on the left is near the northern end of the High Street. It was once the home of Jack Cardiff, OBE, a respected cinematographer and film director through much of the 20th century. The town council installed a 'blue plaque' to honour the former resident.

This is one of several blue plaques around the town.

The Parish Rooms, pictured below, date from the 16th century and are used by various groups associated with St Mary's Church.



The town's war memorial stands at the southern end of the High Street, shown below on the left. Saffron Walden Cemetery, on the right, was opened in 1857 in what is now called Radwinter Road. One section has three rows of graves for casualties of World War II. The gravestones face a "Cross of Sacrifice", a memorial installed widely by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, generally in cemeteries where there are more than 40 graves.



The parish of Saffron Walden extends beyond the town to include the hamlets of Audley End to the west and Little Walden to the north. Audley End is mainly a single street of terraced houses on each side. The hamlet has two unusual listings, one for each side of the street covering most of the houses on that side. On the right, we show the west side which dates mostly from the 18th century but has some elements of 16th and 17th.



Audley End hamlet also has a group of larger houses opposite the entrance to Audley End House. Two are pictured below - Home Farm House on the left and Abbey House on the right.



Whereas the town has many and diverse places to eat and drink, Audley End has just the tea rooms when Audley End House or the miniature railway are open.

The hamlet of Little Walden has a very popular pub, the Crown, pictured below. Across the road is Little Walden's most unusual village sign.



Although the population of Saffron Walden has doubled since the 1960s, the countryside is not far away and it is attractive and undulating. For enthusiastic walkers, Saffron Walden features on the Harcamlow Way and is also the northwestern end of the 71-mile Saffron Trail that crosses Essex diagonally from Southend-on-Sea.

For the energetic, the Lord Butler Leisure Centre has many sports facilities including a swimming pool and an adjacent, extremely popular skate park. For a fleeting look at the scenery, there is always the annual 10km running race organised by Saffron Striders. It attracts hundreds of competitors.

As we take our leave of Saffron Walden parish, let us look back. This view of Audley End House from the south also shows the River Cam in the foreground with the 1764 bridge designed by Robert Adam. In the distance, the spire of St Mary's Church is just visible.

The bridge, the mansion and the church are just three of the parish's ten buildings that merit a listing in the most important category, Grade I.



For the record, the others are St Mark's College, the three buildings that once made up the Old Sun Inn, the former Youth Hostel, Robert Adam's tea house and bridge within the grounds of Audley End House, and Walden Castle.

The listings on the next page are not exhaustive. In particular, we have not attempted to include the many and diverse places to eat and drink in the town, or the many books that have been published on many aspects of the town's history, architecture, etc. You are encouraged to come and spend a day or two and find them for yourself.

FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT SAFFRON WALDEN

Latest information on where to stay, where to eat, what to do, etc:

Tourist Information Centre, 1 Market Place, CB10 1HR – 01799 524002 – <https://www.visitsaffronwalden.gov.uk/>

Entertainment:

Saffron Hall, CB11 4UH - <https://www.saffronhall.com/> - 01799 588545; Box Office: 0845 548 7650.
Saffron Screen, CB11 4UH - <https://saffronscreen.com/> – 01799 500238.

Specific Attractions:

Audley End House & Gardens, CB11 4JF (1 mile from town or Audley End Stn) – 01799 522842 - <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/audley-end-house-and-gardens/>
Audley End Miniature Railway, CB11 4JB - 01799 510726 - <https://www.audley-end-railway.co.uk/>
Fry Art Gallery, Castle Street, CB10 1BN - 01799 520679 – <https://fryartgallery.org/>
Saffron Walden Museum, CB10 1BN – 01799 510333 - <http://www.saffronwaldenmuseum.org/>
The Old Sun Inn – information and guided tours - <https://oldsuninn.com/>
Saffron Walden Skate Park, CB11 3EG -
- <https://www.skateparks.co.uk/essex/one-minet-skatepark-saffron-walden/>
Lord Butler Leisure Centre, CB11 3EG – 01799 522777
- <https://www.leisurecentre.com/lord-butler-fitness-leisure-centre>
Faircroft House Arts & Media Centre, CB11 3HD – 01799 668069 –
<https://www.facebook.com/faircroft/>
Saffron Grange Vineyard, CB10 1UZ - 01799 516597 - <https://www.saffrongrange.com/>

Accommodation:

Cross Keys Hotel, High Street, CB10 1AX – 01799 522207 - <https://www.theoldcrosskeys.co.uk/>
Crown, Little Walden – 01799 522475 – <http://www.thecrownlittlewalden.co.uk/>

Self-catering:

Drake Cottage, CB10 1BB - <https://drakecottage.com/>
Miller Cottage, - <https://www.grove-cottages.co.uk/cottage/miller-cottage/>
Stables, Debden Road, CB11 4AB – 01799 521148 - <http://www.saffronwaldenholidaycottages.co.uk/>
The Old School Room, CB11 4JB - <https://the-oldschoolroom.co.uk/>
Coach House, CB11 3JB – 07966 395795 - <https://www.coachhousesaffronwalden.co.uk/>

Hundred Parishes Society walks include . . .

Circular walk 101, a route of 6.7 miles that explores Saffron Walden's town and countryside.
Two Station walks pass through the parish. They could be joined in Saffron Walden, followed to the end and then (after catching the train to the start point) completed to finish in Walden . . .
Walk 16 covers 7 miles between Newport & Audley End stations – join the description at page 3.
Walk 21 covers 8 miles between Audley End & Great Chesterford stations – join at page 3 or 4.

Adjacent parishes: Newport, Wendens Ambo, Littlebury, Little Chesterford, Great Chesterford, Hadstock, Ashdon, Swards End, Wimbish, Debden.

Links:

Town Council: <https://saffronwalden.gov.uk/>
Tourist Information: <https://www.visitsaffronwalden.gov.uk/>
Saffron Walden Historical Society: <https://saffronwaldenhistory.org.uk/>
History: www.recordingtuttlesfordhistory.org.uk/saffronwalden/saffronwaldenhomepage.html
Saffron Striders: www.saffronstriders.org.uk
Saffron Walden Railway Station: http://www.disused-stations.org.uk/s/saffron_walden/index.shtml
1981 BBC film about Saffron Walden with explanation and opinions from Alec Clifton-Taylor (the beginning is missing): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KqUyzk8V7IY>
1983 film re Essex guidance on pargetting - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zO4pQHXAIOs>
2021 film by Saffron Walden Tourist Information Centre: <https://youtu.be/2MxEFeBqQBg>
2021 film by Saffron Walden Heritage Development Group about the town's medieval history: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGwyPb2bd8c>

Further reading:

The list of books about Saffron Walden is long and growing. For details of what is currently available, please visit the Tourist Information Centre in the Market Place.