



The Hundred Parishes

An introduction to

THORLEY



Location: 1 mile southwest of Bishop's Stortford. **Ordnance Survey grid square:** TL4718. **Postcode** CM23 4BE. **Access** A1184, B1529. **Buses** 508, 509, 510 between Harlow and Stansted Airport stop near The Coach and Horses. **Station** Bishop's Stortford - 2 miles
County: Hertfordshire. **District:** East Herts. **Population:** 499 in 2001, 626 in 2011, 610 in 2021.

The Hertfordshire parish of Thorley has the shape of a crescent, curving around the southern boundary of Bishop's Stortford. The seemingly inexorable expansion of its northern neighbour has been achieved largely by regular transfer of land from Thorley parish to Bishop's Stortford.

At the very end of the 20th century, Thorley parish was bisected by the construction of the A1184, Bishop's Stortford bypass, but the new road seems to offer an opportunity to halt the advance of urbanisation and to leave the historic and spiritual core of Thorley unmolested.



Thorley's Grade I church, dedicated to St James the Great, is part of a small group of impressive buildings that have existed for many centuries. The church dates from at least the 12th century and its features include an ornate Norman doorway from the south porch, a font of the same period and a yew tree a thousand years old.

It is approached through an ornate oak lychgate that dates from around 1909.



The adjacent 13th-century Thorley Hall, below, is believed to be the second-oldest house in Hertfordshire. Its long line of distinguished owners includes the legendary Dick Whittington who was mayor of London in the late 1300s, although there is no evidence that he ever lived here.



This ancient centre of Thorley also includes two 16th-century barns, one of which is pictured below.



The second barn was constructed in the 1530s and beautifully renovated in the 1990s to become an extension of the church premises.



It was named the St Barnabas Centre after St Barnabas who sold his wheatfield 2000 years ago and donated the proceeds to the Apostles, just like a member of the St James congregation who was obliged to sell farmland for the expansion of Bishop's Stortford and donated much of the proceeds to fund most of the barn's £1 million redevelopment cost.

Each Sunday, the St Barnabas Centre hosts one of the church services with a congregation approaching 200. It also serves other community purposes and is in great demand for wedding receptions. There is a link below to an in-depth look at the barn's history.

In the 1990s, this group of ancient buildings at the heart of the parish were segregated from much of the parish by the construction of Bishop's Stortford's southern bypass. They now stand at the end of a narrow lane that passes over that relatively new road. At one time the group of ancient buildings was surrounded by a moat, some of which is still in evidence.

In the Domesday Book of 1086, Torlei was slightly smaller than Bishop's Stortford and both were over-shadowed by their southern neighbour, Sawbridgeworth, which was far more populous.

Evidence of much earlier settlement was uncovered during construction of the St Michael's Mead estate; archaeologists found Roman, Iron Age, Bronze Age and Neolithic remains, the last from around 5,000 years ago.

Whilst the boundary of Thorley parish has contracted in recent times, it still includes not only Old Thorley around the church, but also the hamlets of Thorley Street and Thorley Wash along its eastern boundary. Some of that eastern boundary is formed by the south-flowing River Stort, whilst nearby the 1842 London – Cambridge railway and the 18th-century turnpike road (now B1529) also run north - south through the parish.



The popular Coach & Horses stands on the old turnpike road and dates from the 16th century.

The River Stort passes Twyford Lock and Twyford Mill, both shown below on the left. Beside the mill is Twyford House, below on the right, a 17th-century building whose interior was renovated in the 1980s by the local Elliotts Building Group for use as their offices.

Both the mill and Twyford House have now been converted into apartments.



Thorley's population was only 268 in the 1971 census but the parish has retained a good variety of older properties, some of which are pictured below.



Moor Hall, shown on the left, dates from the 16th century or earlier when it served as a manor house. It was built as a hall house before the days of chimneys; the hall was the main room of the house and was heated by an open fire in the centre of the room. The smoke would rise to exit through holes in the roof. It has since been modernised!

Below is 17th-century Sparrow Nest.



Butler's Hall is shown immediately below.



Below on the left, The Old Thatch dates from the 16th century. The Victorian postbox is still providing service outside the former Thorley School which is now used by the Scouts.



Thorley's history has been extremely well recorded. This brief introduction has drawn heavily on the excellent websites linked below. The St James website is a great source for anyone interested in family members who lived here, including transcriptions of gravestones and the parish records back to the 1750s.

Thorley is well served by footpaths, including the Hertfordshire Way which runs east – west, passing the church and Moor Hall. Hundred Parishes walk 176 is very varied, contrasting the parish's rural element with recent residential expansion.

A visit to the parish church is recommended. It has many interesting features including the stained-glass window shown on the right and the square Norman font, below.



MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THORLEY

Hospitality:

Coach and Horses, Thorley Street, CM23 4AS – 01279 710991 -

<https://www.mcmullens.co.uk/coachandhorses>

Hundred Parishes Society walks include . . .

Circular walk 176 - starts at Thorley Church and covers 5 miles of Thorley paths and lanes.
Station walk 8 covers 5 miles between Sawbridgeworth and Bishop's Stortford stations and goes through part of Thorley, passing Twyford Lock and Twyford House.

Adjacent Hundred Parishes parishes:

Sawbridgeworth, High Wych, Much Hadham, Little Hadham, Great Hallingbury, Little Hallingbury.

Links:

Parish Council: <http://www.thorleyparishcouncil.co.uk/>

History of Thorley including family history resources: www.friends-stjames.org

History of Thorley: https://www.stortfordhistory.co.uk/thorley/thorley_1.html

Friends of St James the Great: <http://www.friends-stjames.org/>

St Barnabas barn: historical and architectural insight: <http://www.stbarnabasbarn.co.uk/>

Further reading:

The Book of Thorley – Chronicles of a Century by the People of the Parish, published 2003.

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