



The Hundred Parishes

An introduction to

AYTHORPE RODING



Location: 5 miles southwest of Great Dunmow. **Ordnance Survey grid square:** TL5915.

Postcode: CM6 1PF. **County:** Essex. **District:** Uttlesford. **Access:** B184.

Buses: 17 (Fri & Sat) to Chelmsford; 18 (Tue & Thur) to Chelmsford.

Population: 201 in 2001, 214 in 2011, 260 in 2021.

Aythorpe Roding is one of a cluster of eight settlements in west Essex, collectively known as The Rodings. The northern four Rodings fall within the Hundred Parishes. The Rodings is believed to be the largest group of villages in the country to bear a common name, having originated as a single community in Anglo-Saxon times as the Hrodingas, after its chieftain Hroda. It appears in the Domesday record as Rodinges in the Hundred of Dunmow, but by the 14th century the main boundaries of the eight villages had been established. The river Roding, also named from Hroda, flows south from its source in Dunmow and meanders through most of the Rodings parishes on its way to the Thames.

The late Essex historian Peter Foley (1923 – 2010) had this to say about the area:

‘This is indeed an enchanted place, this land of The Rodings, a place of sudden hills and unsuspected hollows, seldom flat but gently undulating. He who seeks contentment, here let him go. He will need no better company than his thoughts. Nor will he find reason to doubt the wisdom of a Saxon’s choice.’

Some three centuries earlier the author Daniel Defoe had taken a rather different view, describing the area as ‘famous for good land, good malt and dirty roads’. Well, the land certainly looks good – verdant and fruitful – and thankfully the roads today are looking pretty clean – at any rate no dirtier than any other. The malt though has yet to be tested!

There is a quiet charm about this place, and a certain timeless quality. There have been no communities of any real substance over the years and few buildings of great importance, and it is interesting to ponder if it might well have been the ‘dirty roads’ (one assumes that Defoe’s reference was to poorly-built or poorly-maintained roads) which kept the settlements and villages small and inaccessible. It may also be the reason for an absence of historic events of any major significance; although - Peter Foley again:

‘History has, to a great degree, passed Aythorpe by. Perhaps we may record one day of sensation. It is related that, in 1652, Mrs Day of Aythorpe Roding perished from spontaneous combustion.’

Is this true? Who would know? – but from this distance the notion, humorous now rather than tragic, adds a certain dramatic frisson to our perception of this otherwise other-worldly corner of the county of Essex.

Aythorpe Roding is a strangely-shaped parish sandwiched between High and Leaden Roding.

Its most notable claim to fame must be the beautiful white windmill built - if the inscription on one of the internal beams is valid - in 1779. Grade II*-listed, it is the largest post mill



remaining in Essex and was worked commercially until the 1930s. It is believed to be still capable of working, following renovation in the early 1980s. The mill is privately owned and currently not open to the public.

Two other buildings are worthy of note. The flint rubble parish church of St Mary the Virgin is predominantly 13th century, with the belfry and spire added later. The porch (seen here) and lych-gate are a much more recent 19th-century addition. Sadly, along with so many very isolated churches in this area, St Mary's remains locked during the week.



The Axe and Compasses is another ancient building worth a visit – and not just for its historic interest. It is a hostelry built in 1707 to serve the needs of stage coaches en route from Dunmow to London.

Refurbished exactly 300 years later, the Axe (as it is called locally) has three times been voted the 'Best Pub Restaurant' in the Essex Food and Drink Awards. Food is available throughout the day, starting at 9am for breakfast.



Hospitality:

Axe and Compasses, CM6 1PP – 01279 876648 – <http://theaxeandcompasses.co.uk>

Included in Hundred Parishes walks:

Number 128 – 9.2 miles

Adjacent parishes: White Roding, High Roding, High Easter, Leaden Roding.

Parish Council: <https://e-voice.org.uk/aythorperodingparishcouncil/>

Further reading:

The Rodings: Eight Ancient Parishes of Essex and a Lost Hamlet. Peter Foley. Out of print but a copy can be downloaded from <https://therodings.blogspot.com/>