



The Hundred Parishes

An introduction to

BARKWAY



Location: 4 miles southeast of Royston. **Ordnance Survey grid square:** TL3835.
Postcode: SG8 8EJ. **Access:** B1368. **County:** Hertfordshire. **District:** North Herts.
Buses: 18 (Mon-Sat) between Royston and Buntingford; 27 (Mon and Weds) to Royston.
Population: 656 in 2001, 775 in 2011, 850 in 2021.

The visitor to Barkway is greeted by a sign that proclaims it to be a "historic coaching village". The claim is well evidenced by this linear settlement, strung out for almost a mile on either side of what was once a main thoroughfare. Today, this is largely a forgotten route between London, Ware and Cambridge, but the village gives the appearance that it has been freshly painted and is just waiting for today's influx of stage coaches.

The milestone in the centre of the village declares distances – at the same time subtly suggesting it is too far to complete the journey today on this dusty or muddy road, so why not spend a pleasant night here? The milestone was installed in 1728, one of a series of stones along the route from Ware to Cambridge, funded by a trust established in 1586 by a former master of Trinity Hall, Cambridge. The shields are of Trinity Hall (on the left) and, curiously, the benefactor's 18th-century executor.



Barkway, in the far northwest of the Hundred Parishes, sits towards the eastern end of the Chiltern chalk hills and is the highest of the Hundred Parishes with a few spots more than 150 metres above sea level. A motte and bailey castle once stood at Periwinkle Hill, to the west of the village, its location no doubt chosen for its strategic position. On a clear day it is still possible to see Ely Cathedral, 30 miles to the North, well beyond the city of Cambridge. Nearby is what was once called "RAF Barkway". There were never any aircraft here, but a very tall radio mast erected in 1941 was part of the RAF communications network until 2011. Also near here is the 2014 installation of 35 acres of solar panels – enough to power 2,000 homes.

Barkway parish, which is 4 miles long from North to South and only about a mile wide, comprises the village of Barkway, the hamlet of Newsells and a few outlying estates. The village evolved where the route from London to Cambridge crossed a pre-historic East - West trackway that followed the ridge of the Chiltern escarpment.



During the coaching era, spanning a period of around 200 years until the middle of the 19th century, many hostelryes, inns and shops catered for passing travellers, making Barkway a relatively wealthy place. These services have all but disappeared, leaving just the Tally Ho at the southern end of the village with limited opening hours and no meals, at least in 2021.

The pub's name reflects a significant aspect of the parish's past and present – horses. Much of the north of the parish is the

Newsells Park estate which has been a stud farm for almost 100 years. A fondness for horses goes back even further - an obelisk in the grounds has no inscription but is understood to have been erected in the 19th century by the then owner, Baron Strathnairn, a retired general, in memory of his favourite mount who had carried him during the Indian Mutiny of 1857. A 1770s map shows an obelisk, casting some doubt on the Strathnairn story – is it fiction or did he replace the old obelisk? The original 17th-century Newsells House was destroyed in an accidental fire during World War II. The then owner, Sir Humphrey de Trafford, bred several successful racehorses here, including winners of the St Leger and Epsom Derby in the 1950s.

Barkway's main war memorial, in the High Street, is supplemented by this unusual monument, dedicated to the seven men from Newsells who died in the First World War.

Barkway has another substantial estate belonging to Cokenach House which dates mostly from the 18th century. The house is listed, as too are its extensive park and gardens that incorporate a series of canals and are little changed since the 18th century. Cokenach Estate is not open to the public but can be hired for weddings and other events. A previous owner, Douglas Crossman, was an enthusiastic supporter of cricket and he established a ground which has been home to Cokenach Cricket Club for almost a hundred years.

While Newsells and Cokenach are private, there are good footpaths across each estate. The long-distance Hertfordshire Way path also passes through the parish and includes a section along the High Street.

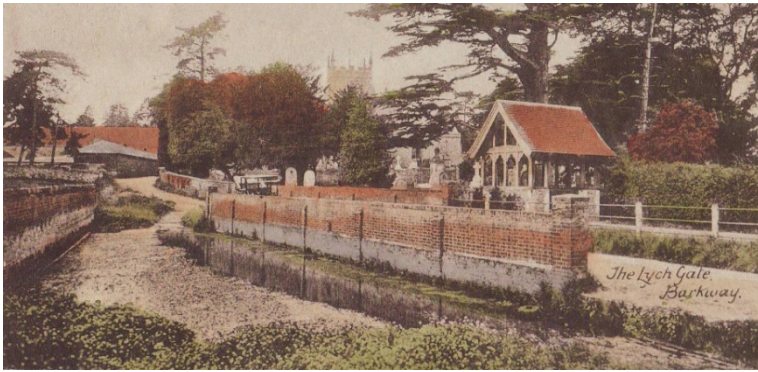


Barkway High Street, despite its designation as the B1368, is now a relatively quiet road, a pleasant place to stroll and view the many varied and attractive buildings that date from the coaching era or even earlier. The parish has a total of 65 listed buildings and the majority stand along or close to the old coaching route. Over half the listings date from the 17th century or earlier. Pictured below are views of the High Street. The two thatched houses were built in the 17th century, the larger one having been three or more dwellings at one time. In the photo on the right, Red House dates mainly from around 1720.



Gables, below on the left, dates from about 1620, while Old Forge on the right is slightly older, from late 16th century. It used to function as two houses and a forge.





Barkway's only Grade I listed building is the parish church, dedicated to St Mary Magdalene. Its chancel dates from the 13th century but most of the church was extensively rebuilt in the 19th century. Its tower can just be seen in the centre background of this old postcard picture that focuses on the wagon wash on the left beside Church Lane. Coaches would drive

through here to clean their wheels and perhaps bide a while to allow wooden spokes to swell and fit tighter into their wooden rims (as depicted in John Constable's "Haywain" painting).

The image below of Barkway High Street comes from another early picture postcard, sent in 1904. Perhaps it was taken on a Sunday as everyone seems smartly dressed. There is not a vehicle in sight, either horse-drawn or motorised. Note the earth bank and steps up to most properties – probably due in part to keeping above the road when it flooded from time to time and perhaps partly due to erosion of the road level by centuries of passing traffic.



The Parish Council website (see link below) includes more old photos, shown alongside today's view of the same location. The overall impression is of relatively little change to the buildings, although fashions have altered and parked cars are now everywhere.

A regular market was held in Barkway from the

13th century. It ceased long ago but was revived in 1977. Since then, the market has been held annually, usually in early May, attracting thousands of visitors from miles around. If you need an excuse to visit, maybe that is it.

Hospitality:

Tally Ho pub (no food, limited opening) – <https://www.facebook.com/TheTallyHoBarkway/>

Hundred Parishes walk routes:

Walk 131: Circular route of 6.5 miles to the north, through Newsells, Cokenach and Barley.

Walk 132: Circular route of 7 miles through Barkway, Nuthampstead and Anstey.

Walk 133: Short stroll of 1.7 miles through Barkway village.

Adjacent Hundred Parishes: Wyddial, Barley, Nuthampstead, Anstey.

Links:

Parish Council: www.barkway-village.org.uk

Hertfordshire Genealogy:

www.hertfordshire-genealogy.co.uk/data/places/places-b/barkway/!-barkway-frame.htm

Newsells Park Stud – history: www.newsells-park.com/stud/history

Barkway Chalk Pit nature reserve: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barkway_Chalk_Pit

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