



The Hundred Parishes

An introduction to

FINCHINGFIELD



Location: 9 miles northeast of Great Dunmow. **Ordnance Survey grid square:** TL6832.
Postcode: CM7 4JS. **County:** Essex. **District:** Braintree. **Access:** B1053, B1057.
Buses: 9/9A (Mon to Fri) to Braintree, 16 (Mon – Sat) between Chelmsford and Wethersfield.
Population: 1,348 in 2001, 1,471 in 2011, 1,400 in 2021.

If ever there was a village which merited the (albeit rather corny) epithet 'chocolate box', it must surely be Finchingfield.

Set in one of the larger Essex parishes, Finchingfield village is one of the most photographed, filmed, drawn and painted locales of the Hundred Parishes domain; its images have appeared, over the years, on television, tea towels, calendars, jigsaw puzzles and, indeed, chocolate boxes.



It is not difficult to see why, for in spite of its popularity and ease of access in these motorised times, it is little damaged by the commerce and tourism of our age and little changed from the earliest photographs and paintings. The image below appeared on a postcard sent in 1905. The picture includes a horse and wagon in the pond and a pile of debris in front of the church - the remains of the Green Man pub which had just been destroyed by fire.



Finchingfield retains a very real olde-world charm, and is perhaps most people's idea of what a typical English village should be: it has a duck pond at its centre on the village green, a narrow bridge over the river, one road rising to the parish church on the hill, another to the windmill; it has the tea room, the old inn, the antique shop, and everywhere the beams, thatch, gentle pastel shades and quirky lopsidedness of houses which have stood for centuries, every one unique. Across the broader parish, more than 100 buildings are listed, with three at Grade I.

Fincingfelda (the fields of Finc's people), as it was known in the days of William the Conqueror, has been a settlement since Roman times. It was an official stop for horse-drawn carriages en route between London and Norwich, a fact underlined even today by the number of hostelries in what is only a small rural community. Within Finchingfield village, The Red Lion is 15th century, the Fox Inn (pictured here) 16th and the Three Tuns 18th. In these days when rural inns are disappearing year on year, it is perhaps a testament to Finchingfield's abiding appeal that three public houses in such close proximity to each other can not only survive but thrive - alongside several tea rooms, a shop and a post office.



Pre-dating even the Red Lion and only a stone's throw across the road is the Grade I-listed parish church of St John the Baptist. The church grounds are entered through the ancient archway of the Guildhall, a recently renovated 15th-century Grade I-listed building which now houses a library, shop and a small museum.



St John's dates from Norman times and offers tangible evidence of every century from that to this. The rood screen between the chancel and the nave, shown below, has been described as one of the finest and most elaborate in the county of Essex. The north chapel of the church is dedicated to one William Kempe who died in 1628. His memorial plaque is something of a curiosity. Most memorial inscriptions, ancient and modern, would suggest to their readers that the person so celebrated was something of a saint. This one is rather different, recording publicly and for ever his imperfection. It seems that Kempe made an unfounded accusation of unfaithfulness in regard to his wife, and with troubled conscience and repentant heart he made a vow 'by a voluntary constancy to hold his peace seven years'. A rare humility, and an unusual find.



One only has to read the other memorial tablets filling the wall space of the Kempe Chapel to become aware of the major contribution of the Ruggles-Brise family to public life generally and to the history of Essex and Finchingfield parish in particular.

Men of the family over the last 200 years have held very senior positions in political and civic life. Samuel, Edward and John were all knights of the realm and served in local government, as members of parliament and with distinction in the military. Evelyn (also knighted) was a prison reformer and founder of the Borstal system for young offenders.

The name and its attachment to civic service continue with Lady Rosemary Ruggles-Brise holding the post of High Sheriff of Essex as recently as 2012.

In the centre of Finchingfield, the artist or photographer is spoilt for choice, with pretty houses in all directions. Just a few are pictured on this page.

At the top is Causeway Cottage, built in the 17th century and for many years a popular tea room with a view down to the pond.

Next, 18th-century Old Mill Cottage stands in front of the windmill.

Immediately below are 16th-century Street Farmhouse on the left and 19th-century Rose Cottage and Corner Cottage on the right.

At the bottom, pink-painted The Manse and thatched Paigles each date from the 19th century.





Finchingfield's windmill is believed to be the oldest surviving windmill in Essex. It is a post mill, meaning that the whole building rotates on a central post so that the sails can continue to face into the wind. It dates from the early 18th century and apparently stood elsewhere before being moved to its present site in the 19th century. It has not operated since the end of the 19th century but provides an attractive focal point for artists and photographers. The mill usually opens for visitors on the third Sunday of each month from April to September, from 2pm to 5pm.



The photo on the left includes two ancient buildings that are now private houses. Bridge House, on the left, dates from around 1600 AD. Between the 1760s and 1830s it served as a workhouse and was home for as many as 25 inmates. In the 20th century, part was used as a butcher's shop.

On the far side of the village green, Finchingfield House is a little older. It has 5 gables facing the pond but one is hidden by the tree.

Finchingfield's third Grade I-listed building (after the church and the guildhall) is Spains Hall, a little to the north of Finchingfield village. It dates mostly from around 1570 AD and was the centre of the Ruggles-Brise family estate from 1760 until 2019 when it was purchased by local celebrity chef Jamie Oliver for his family home.



The Ruggles-Brise family still owns and farms the extensive Spains Hall estate. In recent years, they have embarked on several environmental initiatives, most notably the controlled settlement of beavers. These industrious animals are, unbeknown to themselves, engaged in work to alleviate the flood risk down in the village. Finchingfield's pond is fed by Finchingfield Brook which flows from the north of the parish, near Spains Hall, and joins the River Pant further south.

With its gently-undulating terrain, it is worth exploring the wider parish. Quiet lanes and footpaths abound. There is much open countryside with dispersed farmhouses and occasional tiny settlements. Around 2 miles to the north of Finchingfield village, still well within the parish, you may be surprised to find another village, complete with its own pub and parish church; this is Cornish Hall End. Its pub, The Horse and Groom is shown below and the church stands opposite. It was built in 1840 and is dedicated to St John the Evangelist.



16th-century Rivetts Farm, shown on the right, lies just outside Cornish Hall End.

A sizeable part of the eastern side of Finchingfield parish was taken over during World War II for the construction of an airfield. It became known as Wethersfield airfield although only a relatively small part is situated in that adjacent parish. It served as an American base after the war and then, since 1993, served as a training ground for the UK's Ministry of Defence Police.



In the tiny hamlet of Howe Street, the thatched house pictured here – 16th-century The Barretts - was for many years the home of novelist Dodie Smith (1896 to 1990). She wrote *The Hundred and One Dalmatians*, a children's novel that was made into a highly successful Disney animated film.

Her life here from 1934 to 1990 is commemorated by a blue plaque to the left of the front door.



One of the roads in Finchingfield village is named after Finchingfield's Nonconformist 17th-century vicar, Stephen Marshall. He was a powerful and influential puritan preacher, addressing the House of Commons several times to advocate church reform. He was buried in Westminster Abbey, but after the restoration of the monarchy his remains, along with those of other supporters of Oliver Cromwell, were removed to a communal, unmarked grave. Today, Stephen Marshall Avenue leads to the small village car park (postcode CM7 4LZ).

It is probably a good idea not to visit the village on a summer Sunday afternoon (unless you have a particular yen to get in to the old post mill). It has to be acknowledged that the world likes to descend upon Finchingfield on warm, sunny weekends! But if you can plan your visit away from peak times, you will see it at its best, the residents will be grateful, and you may actually be able to get into the car park.



Hospitality:

Finchingfield Lion, CM77 4NN – 01371 810400 - <https://thefinchingfieldlion.co.uk/>

Fox Inn, CM7 4JX – 01371 810151 - <https://foxonthegreen.co.uk/>

Greedy Duck tea room, CM7 4JS – 07904 547829

Horse & Groom, Cornish Hall End, CM7 4HF – 01799 586306 - www.thehorseandgroom.org

Picture Pot café, CM7 4JS – 01371 811009

Three Tuns, CM7 4NR – 01371 810165

Winner's Tea Room, CM7 4JX – 01371 810605 - <https://www.winnerstearooms.com/>

Zafra pasta bar and grill, CM7 4JS – 01371 810501

Hundred Parishes Society walks include 2 circular countryside walks between Finchingfield and Great Bardfield. They can be downloaded, free of charge, from the website:

Walk 103 starts from Finchingfield and covers 4.5 miles, and

Walk 104 starts from Great Bardfield, covering 6.3 miles.

Adjacent parishes:

Great Bardfield, The Sampfords, Hempstead, Steeple Bumpstead, Wethersfield, Shalford.

Links:

Parish Council: www.finchingfield-pc.gov.uk

Roger Beckwith's personal view with many images, old and new: www.finchingfield.org.uk

Finchingfield Guildhall: www.finchingfieldguildhall.org.uk

St John's church review: <https://stepneyrobarts.blogspot.com/2010/07/finchingfield-essex.html>

10-minute film of village life in 1937: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DtGI5T6aUYM>

Spains Hall Estate: <https://www.spainshallestate.co.uk/>

Transcript of "Stephen Marshall, a Forgotten Essex Puritan":

http://archive.org/stream/stephenmarshallf00vaugrich/stephenmarshallf00vaugrich_djvu.txt

Further reading:

A Family Story: The Ruggles of Spains Hall, Finchingfield, Edith Freeman