



The Hundred Parishes

An introduction to

GREAT EASTON & TILTY



Location: 2.5 miles northwest of Great Dunmow. **Ordnance Survey grid square:** TL6025.

Postcode CM6 2HR. **County:** Essex. **District:** Uttlesford. **Access:** B184.

Buses (Mon – Sat): 313 and 314 between Saffron Walden & Great Dunmow.

Population: 895 in 2001, 1,035 in 2011, 1,200 in 2021.

Although Great Easton and Tilty are separate parishes, each holding an annual parish meeting, they chose in 2007 to be grouped for administrative purposes under a single parish council. It is primarily a rural parish, mostly arable farmland, whose main settlements are at Great Easton and Duton Hill, with small hamlets at Tilty, Little Cambridge, Gallows Green and Millend Green. The River Chelmer flows from north to south and forms the boundary between Tilty to the west and Great Easton to the east. The villages of Great Easton, Duton Hill and Tilty are on higher ground with fine views along the Chelmer valley. The river itself is usually inconspicuous, but after heavy rain it can flood and cut off access to Duton Hill and Great Easton from the west.

Tilty is mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086. Its name is thought to have originated from words meaning either *Tila's enclosure* or *tilled land*. Domesday also includes *Estances*, possibly meaning *Aega's stone*. *Estances* is now split between Great Easton and Little Easton parishes.



Tilty Abbey was founded in 1153 for Cistercian monks. The monks did not allow outsiders inside their monastery church, so around 1220 they built a chapel outside the abbey gates for use by visitors and other members of the abbey community. This became the parish church. Today only a short section of wall remains of the abbey - in the field beyond the church. Several information panels around the site help to explain the extensive monastery that once stood here.

Externally, the parish church has two distinct halves. The photo on the left shows the original modest element, the nave, in the foreground, with its 18th-century bell turret and cupola. Behind is the chancel which was added around 1330 with the great east window, shown below.



The abbey was sacked by King John's soldiers in 1215, but it survived and prospered during the 13th and 14th centuries, particularly from the wool trade. It was disbanded in 1536 as part of Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries.

One wonders what the monks would have made of the 1948 Pathé News film (see link below) of their chapel, which was merely a backdrop for the main story – that Tilty's left-wing vicar, Hugh Cuthbertson, had established a "smokers' cooperative" to help smokers avoid paying duty

on tobacco. He had learned about small-scale tobacco processing whilst ministering in Chile. The profits from growing and curing tobacco and from giving advice on home-growing helped to finance church renovations. The Reverend Cuthbertson's daughter continued to run the Tilty Tobacco Centre and Tobacco Curing Cooperative until 2013. Today, the church's fund-raising activities tend to be along more traditional lines.

The rolling countryside of Great Easton and Tilty gave inspiration to a number of writers and artists who lived in Duton Hill in the 20th century, including the noted landscape and portrait painter Sir George Clausen (1852 to 1944).

The area is crisscrossed by footpaths, including long-distance Harcamlow Way which descends from Tilty Church past remains of the abbey to the early 18th-century Tilty watermill (both shown here).

The mill stands on a tributary of the River Chelmer, possibly on the site of an abbey mill. Most of the mill's workings survive, but it has been neglected for many years and is in a sorry state of repair, despite its Grade II* listing. During the late 1940s and 1950s the Canadian poet and novelist Elizabeth Smart and her four children lived in the adjacent Mill House. Here she regularly hosted informal gatherings of writers and artists. The children's estranged father, English poet George Barker, was an occasional visitor.



Great Easton and Tilty have a combined total of 87 listed buildings, spread throughout the parishes. Of these, 40 date from 1600 AD or earlier, an extremely rich heritage. Much of Great Easton village is also designated as a Conservation Area. This photo of Great Easton shows the war memorial on the small village green and two of the listed buildings. On the left is the former Bell Inn, dating from around 1500 AD. The Garth, painted pink, was built around 1900.



Great Easton's Norman church of St John and St Giles stands to the right of the war memorial and is shown here. It is the product of construction, reconstruction and maintenance over nine centuries. The nave dates from early 12th century, whilst the brick bell tower is as recent as 1928, mounted on the original west wall.

Just beyond the church, largely hidden from view behind the high hedgerow, is a mound around 20 feet high (6 metres). This used to be the base of a motte castle. There would have been a wooden palisade and keep on top, with a fine view over the Chelmer valley.

The motte's origin is not known for certain, but it was probably constructed in the middle of the 12th century during the period of civil war known as "The Anarchy". It would have been an "adulterine" castle, meaning constructed without royal approval.



The Earl of Essex, Geoffrey de Mandeville, was one of the barons who switched allegiance between King Stephen and his cousin and rival, Matilda. De Mandeville died in 1144 after a skirmish with King Stephen's men. Although he did not own land in Great Easton, de Mandeville's activities heightened tensions and fear that encouraged the building of a number of similar castles in and around Essex to afford some protection during those troubled times.

A little way down the hill from the village green is the Swan Inn, pictured here. It was built originally as an open hall house around 1400 AD. The parish has two more public houses - at Duton Hill and Millend Green.

At the bottom of the hill, the road crosses the River Chelmer. An unusual footbridge, pictured below, provides an alternative for pedestrians wishing to avoid the ford when the river is full. In the distance is one of Great Easton's oldest buildings, 14th-century Bridgefoot.



The picture on the right is of 16th-century Abbey Cottage in Duton Hill, one of so many attractive buildings with which this parish delights the visitor with an interest in architecture or photography.

Hospitality:

Green Man, Mill End Green, CM6 2DN – 01371 852285 - <https://greenmanlindsell.co.uk>
Three Horseshoes, Duton Hill, CM6 2DT – 01371 870681 - <http://www.the-shoes.co.uk/>
The Swan, Great Easton, CM6 2HG – 01371 499795 (re-opened 2021)

Hundred Parishes Society walks include . . .

Circular walk 120 – 5.5 miles between Broxted and Tilty
Circular walk 163 – 3.9 miles around Great and Little Easton (join on page 4 in Great Easton)
Circular walk 170 – 5.8 miles starting in Duton Hill.

Adjacent parishes: Little Easton, Broxted, Thaxted, Lindsell, Great Dunmow.

Links:

Great Easton and Tilty Parish Council: <https://www.greateastonparishcouncil.co.uk/>
Great Easton Conservation Area appraisal – link from www.uttlesford.gov.uk/caa
Tilty Archaeology & Local History Group: www.tiltyhistoryprojects.co.uk
History – Great Easton: www.recordinguttlesfordhistory.org.uk/gteaston/gteaston.html
History – Tilty: www.recordinguttlesfordhistory.org.uk/Tilty/tiltyhome.html
Vicar Hugh Cuthbertson and tobacco manufacture in Tilty – 1948 Pathé News extract – www.britishpathe.com/video/wot-no-cigarettes/query/tilty
Elizabeth Smart & Tilty Mill: <http://londongrip.co.uk/2012/02/an-arcadian-literary-childhood-in-tilty/>

Further reading:

The Five Parishes – a brief history, Claire Squibb, 2002, published by the Five Parishes.

This page, last updated 31 October 2023, was downloaded from www.hundredparishes.org.uk.