



The Hundred Parishes

An introduction to

HATFIELD HEATH



Location: 5 miles southeast of Bishop's Stortford. **Ordnance Survey grid square:** TL5215.
Postcode: CM22 7EA. **County:** Essex. **District:** Uttlesford. **Access:** A1060, B183.
Buses: 59 (Mon to Fri) between Chelmsford & Harlow; 305 (Mon to Sat) between Bishop's Stortford & Stansted Airport; 347 (Tues and Thurs) one bus to Harlow.
Population: 1,670 in 2001, 1,930 in 2011, 2,000 in 2021.

Many roads meet at Hatfield Heath - a very large, open green which embraces church and cricket pitch, but little else that would obscure the view. Hatfeilda, its Saxon name, described a clearing or an area of open ground in a landscape which at that time would have been mostly wooded. Its suffix 'Heath' – an open area of uncultivated land – completes a title which remains apposite even today. Despite its roads defining it rather as an historic place of trade and commerce, and despite a size much diminished since early times, the heath itself retains a certain primal air and it is not difficult to imagine scenes of antiquity. Indeed, it is still in the ownership of a lord of the manor, and four of its houses vest their owners with 'rights of common': curious to the modern ear, these are rights of loppage (wood gathering), pannage (pasturing swine) and warren (hunting rabbits). Only the lord however had the right of chase (hunting other animals) – a gift which the most recent incumbent appears to have forgone in favour of the quieter pursuit of presiding over Hatfield Regis Local History Society.



The road hub of Hatfield Heath appears to have evolved in the 17th and 18th centuries in response to the horse-drawn carriage of wheat from Suffolk to London. It was a convenient stopping-off point en route, a fact which might also have had something to do with the proliferation of hostleries and ale-houses in the area. The 16th-century Thatchers, shown here, survives from those times, although there are numerous other pubs and restaurants of a more recent heritage.



Also with a rich history to its name is the Grade II*-listed Down Hall. Although today a predominantly Victorian building, Down Hall was originally a 14th-century monastery, became a country house in Tudor times, was remodelled in the early 1700s and largely rebuilt in the 1860s. It operated as a sanatorium for wounded soldiers in the First World War, a girls' school mid-century, and opened as a luxury hotel in 1986.

Other notable buildings in the village include the parish church of Holy Trinity with its octagonal spire. Built in 1859, it is set in a wooded graveyard on the heath itself.

The United Reformed Church a little further down the road is of a similar vintage, although had its origins much earlier in the dissent from the Act of Uniformity 1662 and the establishing of a non-conformist gathering. Initially held in a home, then a barn, the church (then known as Congregational), established its first building in 1726, subsequently changing its affiliation from Presbyterian to Congregational.



In the mid-19th century, both churches founded a school: the British School was attached to the Congregational, and the National School to Holy Trinity. The British School's principal claim to fame seems to be the visits of one Matthew Arnold, latterly of course much better known for his poetry than his work as one of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools. Today, there is just one primary school, opened in 1899 by the Very Reverend Montague Butler, grandfather of Rab Butler, Minister of Education some 40 years later.

A little outside the main part of the village is another establishment of historic interest, largely forgotten or ignored by most, though remembered and valued by some (see Further Reading below). Off Mill Lane is the derelict remains of Prisoner of War Camp 116, one of many such camps in the country built in 1941 to house first Italian and later German prisoners. It is now in private hands and much damaged by vandalism and the elements, and whilst not exactly the place for a pleasant Sunday afternoon outing, the camp is of considerable interest to wartime history. It has been the subject of coverage by local TV in 2008 and a campaign for its preservation and restoration.



Footpaths allow exploration of the extended parish and two specific walks are suggested below. For the seriously committed, the long-distance paths of the Forest, the Three Forests, the Harcamlow and the Stort Valley Ways are all within easy reach.



Hatfield Heath remains a busy and vibrant community. Its three village halls are in constant use by over 30 clubs and organisations, from the Fitness Bootcamp to the seniors' Luncheon Club. At the hub of community life must surely be the Hatfield Heath Village Magazine, a colourful and newsy monthly publication which, remarkably, has been informing local residents since 1893 (link below). And there is perhaps nothing better designed to bring together the village and beyond than the annual Hatfield Heath Festival, rather

quaintly known these days as Hat Fest. If you are planning a visit, it's always in June; you will find the date on the parish website.

Hospitality:

Down Hall Country House Hotel, CM22 7AS – 01279 731441 - www.downhall.co.uk
Friars Barn B&B, CM22 7AP – 01279 730244 - www.friarsfarmbedandbreakfast.co.uk
Hunters Meet Restaurant, CM22 7BQ – 01279 730549 - www.huntersmeet.co.uk
The Thatchers, CM22 7DU – 01279 730270 - <https://www.thethatcherspub.com>
Village Tearoom, CM22 7EB – 01279 739253 - <http://www.thevillagetearoom.co.uk/>
White Horse, CM22 7EB – 01279 730351

Hundred Parishes Society walks include . . .

Circular walk 151 - starts in Sheering and covers 4.9 miles, half in rural Hatfield Heath parish.
Circular walk 152 covers 3.9 miles, starting and finishing in Hatfield Heath village

Adjacent parishes: Little Hallingbury, Hatfield Broad Oak, White Roding, Matching, Sheering.

Links:

Parish Council: www.hatfieldheath.com
Hatfield Regis Local History Society: <https://hatfieldregislocalhistorysociety.weebly.com/>
Parish magazine: <https://hatfieldheathvillagemagazine.weebly.com/>

Further reading:

A History of Hatfield Heath, Hatfield Heath History Group.
Prisoner of War Camp 116, Mill Lane, Hatfield Heath, Hatfield Regis Local History Society.