



The Hundred Parishes

An introduction to

SAFFRON WALDEN



Location: 16 miles south of Cambridge. **Ordnance Survey grid square:** TL5338.

Postcode: CB10 1HL. **County:** Essex. **District:** Uttlesford. **Rail:** 2 miles from Audley End station on London Liverpool Street - Cambridge line. **Roads:** B184, B1052, B1053.

Buses include: 7 (regular, each day) between Saffron Walden and Cambridge; 301 (Mon – Sat) to Audley End Station and Bishop's Stortford; 313 (Mon – Sat) to Great Dunmow; 316 (Mon – Sat) to Stansted Airport; 319, 320 and 321 (Mon – Sat) between Audley End Stn and Haverhill; 59 and 590 (Mon – Fri) to Audley End Stn; 132 (Sundays only) to Cambridge.

Population: 14,606 in 2001, 15,504 in 2011, 17,000 in 2021.

Saffron Walden is the largest settlement in the Hundred Parishes, with a population in excess of 15,000. It is a picturesque market town whose centre retains its medieval street pattern and includes many of the town's 300 listed buildings spanning the period since it was first granted permission to hold a market in 1141. This introduction only scratches the surface of this parish's history, heritage and facilities. Its story has been written in many books, some of which are listed below. Its amenities include a hospital, museum, art gallery, arts & media centre, community-run cinema and a fabulous concert hall opened in 2013.

Permission to hold a market was granted around the time when the castle and church were built on the hilltop site and nearby Walden Abbey was founded. Chipping (or chepying) was an old name for market, and this market town was known then as Chipping Walden. It prospered from its privilege of holding markets and from wool and weaving. Later in the Middle Ages, the town enjoyed success as England's main centre for growing the saffron crocus and trading in saffron which was used for flavouring, medicine and as a yellow dye. The economic importance of this was recognised in a change of name to Saffron Walden. Saffron ceased to be grown here commercially in the 18th century.



Walden Castle was built in about 1125 by Geoffrey de Mandeville. It had a rather short life and was already neglected and part-ruined by the 14th century. All that can be seen today are fragments of 12th century rubble walls and a ruin of the 40 feet (13 metres) square keep. Within the area of the Castle's inner bailey is Saffron Walden Museum, one of the oldest purpose-built museums in the country.



The parish church of St Mary probably stands on the site of its Norman predecessor. At nearly 200 feet (60 metres) long, it is the largest church in the Hundred Parishes (a little bigger than Thaxted) and possibly even the largest parish church in the whole of Essex and Hertfordshire. It is not only large, but rich in style. The present structure dates from the 13th century but was

mostly rebuilt between 1450 and 1525. The 193 feet (59 metres) spire, a landmark over a wide area, was added in 1832. Inside, the most elaborate monument is of black marble, to Thomas Audley (1488-1544). Thomas Audley served as Lord Chancellor under Henry VIII and was granted Walden Abbey during the dissolution of the monasteries. His grandson, Thomas Howard, 1st Earl of Suffolk, subsequently built Audley End House on the site of Walden Abbey.

Audley End House stands beside the River Cam, in the valley about a mile from the town centre, whilst its estate comes right up to the town. The mansion was built in the early 1600s and was the most palatial house in England. It was said by King James I to be “too large for a king, though it might suit a lord treasurer”. Thomas Howard was, indeed, the King’s treasurer – and in 1619 he was imprisoned for using public money to finance his personal extravagances! The family could not afford to maintain Audley End and it was sold in 1668 to Charles II. In the 18th century, two-thirds of the mansion was demolished in order to reduce the cost of upkeep. It is still a very large mansion (shown here from the gardens at the rear) and is now maintained by English Heritage. It is open to the public and its many visitors enjoy fine interiors and works of art, a splendid dolls house and a large collection of stuffed birds, as well as fine gardens and parkland.



Opposite the entrance are a miniature railway and play area that are great attractions for families. During World War II Audley End was a centre for training Polish underground resistance soldiers before they were airlifted behind enemy lines.

Audley End Station (actually in the parish of Wendens Ambo) on the railway line between London Liverpool Street and Cambridge is about one mile from Audley End House and two miles from Saffron Walden town. For 99 years, from 1865 to 1964, the town had its own station, on a branch line that ran between Audley End and Bartlow, but sadly it was closed as being uneconomic.

The central part of Saffron Walden is rich in historic houses and shops and both the main and side streets are architecturally pleasing. This area centres upon the Market Place where an outdoor market is held on Tuesdays and Saturdays. Buildings around the market square include the Town Hall and the Corn Exchange. The latter, in an Italian style of design, dates from 1848 and currently accommodates the Library. The Town Hall is of brick and dates from 1761 although the half-timbered gable was added in 1879. This building also houses the Saffron Walden Tourist Information Centre, regularly voted the best in Essex. If you are new to the town, this is a good place to start to discover what’s on and where to go.



The High Street is mostly of the late Georgian period and several of its houses are of the elegant design of that period.

The High Street leads past Myddylton Place with, at the corner, the former youth hostel building, pictured here. It is one of the best medieval houses in the town. Inside is an original screen as well as features that date from the 15th century. Just beyond, there are attractive old houses, too, in Bridge Street where there is another 16th-century inn, the Eight Bells, with dolphins carved below the downstairs window.

Charming old houses are found in most of the side streets in the older part of the town.

The 18th century predominates in both Gold Street and High Street where the bulky blocks of former maltings are also a part of the scene.

At the corner of Market Hill and Church Street is the old Sun Inn of 14th-century origin, pictured here. This is one of the oldest and best architectural points in the town. It has oversailing gables and is richly adorned with 17th-century plasterwork including two giants and patterns of foliage, birds and other symbols.



There are 16th-century cottages in nearby Church Path and Georgian brick fronts both here and in Castle Street.

The lovely Bridge End Garden can be approached from either Bridge Street or Castle Street. The gardens were created in the 1840s by Francis Gibson, a member of the Quaker family that made a fortune from banking and brewing and then gave generously to the town. After a period of decline, the gardens were restored and reopened in 2005 to provide an attractive oasis that is open to the public each day free of charge. This view of one area, the Dutch garden, with its clipped yews, roses and fountain, can be enjoyed from a viewing platform. The Gardens also include a hedge maze and kitchen garden, both with limited opening hours (check timings with the Tourist Information Centre).



Between Bridge End Garden and Castle Street is the Fry Art Gallery which opens seasonally (see website details below) and displays many works by well-known local artists including the late Edward Bawden and Eric Ravilious. With approval from his daughter, one of Ravilious's wood engravings was adopted as the logo for The Hundred Parishes Society.



The oldest of Saffron Walden's open spaces is the Common on the east side of the centre and flanked by late Georgian houses. It was a meadow on which the burgesses of former times - perhaps even back to the Saxon period - had grazing rights and it was used also for such events as tournaments. Today it is a 14-acre open green with trees around its edge and, close to the eastern side, the largest earthen or turf maze still surviving in England. Its date of origin is unknown but it was here in 1699. It was recut several times in the 19th century and again in 1911. The 'path' winds for about one mile through the turf within a circle 100 feet (30m) in diameter.

In Mount Pleasant Road is one of the town's oldest scholastic establishments - the former Friends' School, a Quaker foundation that dates back to 1702 when it was founded in the Clerkenwell area of London. The move to Saffron Walden came in 1879 when the present buildings were erected of red brick in a Tudor style of architecture. The independent school's success, with up to 300 pupils, came to a sudden end in 2017 when it closed, apparently unable to resolve financial difficulties. A decision is awaited on the future of the school site.

Much more modern are the buildings in Audley End Road of the County High School which opened in 1953. This too has grown and grown and now incorporates Saffron Screen, the community-run cinema, and a separate concert hall, Saffron Hall, that are used at different times by either pupils or the general public.



Shown above are views along Bridge Street (top), and Castle Street (below). On the right is Church Street and beneath it the former Saffron Walden Hospital, opened in 1866 and now serving as council offices for Uttlesford District Council.

The parish of Saffron Walden extends beyond the town to include the hamlets of Audley End to the west and Little Walden to the north.

Although the population of Saffron Walden has doubled in the last 50 years, the countryside is not far away and it is attractive and undulating. This view is in the north of the parish, looking west towards Westley Farm.



There are plenty of footpaths. For enthusiastic walkers, Saffron Walden features on the Harcamlow Way and is the northwestern end of the 71-mile Saffron Trail that crosses Essex diagonally from Southend-on-Sea.

For the energetic, the Lord Butler Leisure Centre has many sports facilities including a swimming pool and an adjacent, extremely popular skate park. For a very quick look at the scenery, there is always the Saffron Striders annual 10km running race which usually attracts 200 competitors.

The listings on the next page are not exhaustive. In particular, we have not attempted to list the many and diverse places to eat and drink in the town, or the many books that have been published on many aspects of the town's history, architecture, etc. You are encouraged to come and spend a day or two and find them for yourself.

FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT SAFFRON WALDEN

Latest information on where to stay, where to eat, what to do, etc:

Tourist Information Centre, 1 Market Place, CB10 1HR – 01799 524002 –
<https://www.visitsaffronwalden.gov.uk/>

Entertainment:

Saffron Hall, CB11 4UH - <https://www.saffronhall.com/> - 01799 588545; Box Office: 0845 548 7650.
Saffron Screen, CB11 4UH - <https://saffronscreen.com/> – 01799 500238.

Specific Attractions:

Audley End House & Gardens, CB11 4JF (1 mile from town or Audley End Stn) – 01799 522842 -
<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/audley-end-house-and-gardens/>
Audley End Miniature Railway, CB11 4JB - 01799 510726 - <https://www.audley-end-railway.co.uk/>
Fry Art Gallery, Castle Street, CB10 1BN - 01799 520679 – <https://fryartgallery.org/>
Saffron Walden Museum, CB10 1BN – 01799 510333 - <http://www.saffronwaldenmuseum.org/>
Saffron Walden Skate Park, CB10 3EG - <http://www.oneminetpark.co.uk/>
Lord Butler Leisure Centre, CB11 3EG – 01799 522777 -
<https://www.1life.co.uk/Lord-Butler-Fitness-and-Leisure-Centre/facilities/>
Faircroft House Arts & Media Centre, CB11 3HD – 01799 668069 –
<https://www.facebook.com/faircroft/>

Accommodation:

Saffron Hotel, High Street, CB10 1AZ – 01799 588882 - <https://saffron-hotel.co.uk/>
Cross Keys Hotel, High Street, CB10 1AX – 01799 522207 - <https://www.theoldcrosskeys.co.uk/>
Crown, Little Walden – 01799 522475 – <http://www.thecrownlittlewalden.co.uk/>

Self-catering:

Drake Cottage, CB10 1BB - <https://drakecottage.com/>
Saffron Cottage, CB10 1BU – 07482 313825
Stables, Debden Road, CB11 4AB – 01799 521148 - <http://www.saffronwaldenholidaycottages.co.uk/>
Coach House, Radwinter Road, CB11 3JB – 07966 395795 –
<https://www.coachhousesaffronwalden.co.uk/>

Hundred Parishes Society walks include . . .

Circular walk 101, a route of 6.7 miles that explores Saffron Walden's town and countryside.
Two Station walks pass through the parish. They could be joined in Saffron Walden, followed to the end and then (after catching the train to the start point) completed to finish in Walden . . .
Walk 16 covers 7 miles between Newport & Audley End stations – join the description at page 3.
Walk 21 covers 8 miles between Audley End & Great Chesterford stations – join at page 3 or 4.

Adjacent parishes: Newport, Wendens Ambo, Littlebury, Little Chesterford, Great Chesterford, Hadstock, Ashdon, Swards End, Wimbish, Debden.

Links:

Town Council: <https://saffronwalden.gov.uk/>
Tourist Information: <https://www.visitsaffronwalden.gov.uk/>
Saffron Walden Historical Society: <https://saffronwaldenhistory.org.uk/>
History: www.recordingtuttlesfordhistory.org.uk/saffronwalden/saffronwaldenhomepage.html
Saffron Striders: www.saffronstriders.org.uk
1981 BBC film about Saffron Walden with explanation and opinions from Alec Clifton-Taylor (the beginning is missing): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KgUyzk8V7IY>
1983 film re Essex guidance on pargetting - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zO4pQHXAIOs>
2021 film by Saffron Walden Tourist Information Centre: <https://youtu.be/2MxEFeBqQBq>
2021 film by Saffron Walden Heritage Development Group about the town's medieval history: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGwyPb2bd8c>

Further reading:

The list of books about Saffron Walden is long and growing. For details of what is currently available, please either visit the Tourist Information Centre in the Market Place or see:
<https://www.visitsaffronwalden.gov.uk/product-category/books/>