



The Hundred Parishes

An introduction to

STRETHALL



Location: 4 miles northwest of Saffron Walden. **Ordnance Survey grid square:** TL4839.

Postcode: CB11 4XJ. **County:** Essex. **District:** Uttlesford.

Access: well off main roads. National Cycle Route 11. No bus service.

Population: 22 in 2001, 26 in 2011 (for postcode CB11 4XJ), Not yet reported for 2021.

Strethall is a small rural parish in the north of Essex, on the border with Cambridgeshire. It has one of the lowest parish populations in England - just 26 recorded in the 2011 Census (up from 22 in 2001). It appeared in the Domesday Book of 1086 as *Strathala*.

Strethall is particularly noteworthy for its tiny church, some of which pre-dates the Domesday Book, having been built in the early 11th century. Parishioners celebrated the church's millennium in 2010 and a new altar cloth proclaims the dates 1010 – 2010.

The parts that are of Saxon origin are the very small nave and chancel arch. Other elements of the church have been added over the centuries, including bells that are exceptionally old, dating from the 14th century, and two pews from the 15th.



An informative leaflet, available in the church, explains that from this relatively high ground it would have been possible to see Cambridge (about 12 miles to the North) being burned by the marauding Danes who came regularly to pillage and, if necessary, to convert the natives to Christianity. The leaflet conjectures that the building of Strethall's church may have been hastened by a desire to demonstrate that forced conversion to Christianity was not necessary here.

This winter photo, taken from a footpath from the south, includes a herd of wild deer, some of which were albino.



Strethall church played a bizarre role in a rather unsavoury episode in 1849. One winter's night, a noisy intruder awakened the household at nearby Strethall Hall and was shot dead by the head of the house. The police failed to identify the intruder, so his body was put on display in the church in the hope that someone would recognise him. Over the next few days, many came to view the body, and the enterprising sexton charged each visitor threepence. Eventually, the deceased was identified as a known poacher and his body was donated to Cambridge University where it is said that his skull and bones are still held for research purposes.

Today, less macabre methods are employed to generate income for the church's upkeep. Since the beginning of the 21st century, Strethall has given its name to a series of lectures, held to raise funds. In giving one of these Strethall Lectures, in 2009, local cultural historian David Heathcote floated the idea that part of Essex, Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire and even Suffolk might be

eligible for designation as a National Park. The concept was taken up by the Essex branch of the Campaign to Protect Rural England and a steering group including David Heathcote developed his vision into what became the Hundred Parishes. It could be argued that Strethall was the birthplace of the Hundred Parishes.

Strethall has no war memorial, indicating that it is one of only 53 "Thankful villages" or "Blessed villages" in the United Kingdom – parishes whose menfolk all returned from the First World War. Strethall was doubly blessed, suffering no losses in the Second World War.

Strethall's church has a Grade I listing. Most of the other buildings in the parish are listed as Grade II and date from the 15th to the 18th century. Three are shown here.



The autumn view on the left, taken along the route of Hundred Parishes walk number 13, shows the long-distance Icknield Way path

heading northeast through a field of wheat towards Great Chesterford railway station, about two miles distant. Strethall's name probably derives from 'street' because part of this stretch of the Icknield Way follows the line of the old Roman Road that ran between Braughing and Great Chesterford, passing through Strethall from its extreme southwest corner to its northeast corner.

Hundred Parishes Society walks include . . .

Circular walk 165 of 3.4 miles, starting from Littlebury Green and passing through Strethall. Station walk number 13 covers 8 miles between Audley End and Great Chesterford stations. It passes through Strethall where the route could be joined at page 2 of the description.

Adjacent parishes: Littlebury, Elmdon & Wenden Lofts, Ickleton.

Links:

Parish Council: There is no parish council, just parish meetings, so no website.

History: <http://www.recordinguttlesfordhistory.org.uk/strethall/strethallhomepage.html>

History: <https://historyhouse.co.uk/placeS/essexs34.html>

Strethall Church: <https://www.essexchurches.info/church.aspx?p=Strethall>

Strethall Church graffiti: <https://rakinglight.co.uk/uk/st-mary-the-virgin-strethall-essex/>

Further reading:

A History of the Manor and Parish of Strethall, David Melford, 2nd edition, 2019.