



The Hundred Parishes

An introduction to

WETHERSFIELD



Location: 6 miles northwest of Braintree. **Ordnance Survey grid square:** TL7131. **Postcode:** CM7 4BZ. **County:** Essex. **District:** Braintree. **Access:** B1053.

Buses: 9/9A (Mon to Fri) to Braintree, 16 (Mon – Sat) to Chelmsford.

Population: 1,232 in 2001, 1,269 in 2011, 1,300 in 2021.

Wethersfield is a parish of north Essex, adjacent to the better-known parish of Finchingfield. These and nearby Great Bardfield are sometimes referred to as the three Fields. Wethersfield is thought to be named after a Viking –Wutha – who after crossing the North Sea would have landed at Mersea and made his way up the Rivers Blackwater and Pant, clearing an area of forest (feld or field) in which to settle.



The site of what is now the parish church of St Mary Magdalene is likely to have held a Saxon church originally. The oldest part of the church now standing is the tower, built in the 12th century, and part of the nave wall is thought to be Saxon. Additions were made in the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries. The church fell into disrepair during the 19th century and stood derelict for some considerable time before being extensively restored during the 1870s; the vestry and organ chamber were added at this time.



Probably the most notable monuments in the church are the recumbent alabaster effigies, thought to be of Henry Wentworth and his wife of Codham Hall in the south of the parish. The figures are badly disfigured by graffiti, some from the 17th century, but it is an interesting quirk of the modern brain that this somehow makes them more, rather than less interesting. No-one condones wanton damage to works of art, but it is curious to note that whilst modern graffiti have a tendency to outrage, historic graffiti are more often viewed as a fascinating commentary on the time in question and set the imagination wandering. An irrelevant but interesting question to ponder is how many centuries must pass before an act of thoughtless vandalism is transmuted into an intriguing statement of social history.

Wethersfield is notable for two important figures of history. A memorial in the church records the Clerke family, one of whose sons, Charles, was a Captain in the Royal Navy in the mid-1700s. Charles Clerke left home at the age of 13 to

attend a naval college and then found adventure exploring the world. He circumnavigated the globe three (almost four) times in his short life. He served under Captain James Cook on each of his three famous long voyages of discovery in HMS Endeavour, Discovery and Resolution. He took over from Cook as leader of the third expedition after Cook was killed but died of tuberculosis soon afterwards. Captain Clerke is sadly little known today although a fitting tribute exists in the form of the book *In the Wake of Captain Cook: the life and times of Captain Charles Clerke, RN, 1741-1779* (see below). Captain Clerke grew up at Brook Farm which dates from around 1300 AD and is pictured here.



Also overshadowed, in this case by more famous members of his own family, yet still worthy of historic note, is the Rev Patrick Bronte, father of Emily, Anne and Charlotte (and their brother Branwell). Wethersfield was Patrick Bronte's first curacy from 1806 to 1808 and he lived in St George's House opposite the church. He was in his early 30s at the time and during his incumbency pursued an unfruitful relationship with one 18-year-old Mary Burden. Few details are known about the ending of the relationship, but the course of English literary history may have been quite different if the union had taken place. Patrick Bronte left Wethersfield and had brief curacies in other churches before finally settling in Haworth, where so much is now known about his ensuing years.

Like many of its neighbouring parishes, Wethersfield once had numerous shops, hostelries and even its own brewery (the Village Hall and Club have since taken up residence in the old malting chamber). Most were clustered around the triangular village green of Wethersfield village itself, now shaded by an imposing copse of tall plane trees and pictured here. The final shops closed in the 21st century, but this area remains the focal point of the village.



There are many buildings of great historic and architectural interest in the parish; well over 100 are listed, most at Grade II, a small number at Grade II* and the church at Grade I. Many overlook the village green but a goodly number are distributed across other areas of the parish, which is home to numerous small hamlets which are all 'Ends' or 'Greens'.

The lovely Blackmore End is one of these and worth a visit, although The Bull, Wethersfield's last remaining pub, has now closed. Blackmore End has its own village hall, shown here.



The curiously named Rotten End is not as notable, although it is interesting to speculate why it would have been so called. There is certainly nothing rotten about it today.



Nearly three miles southeast of Wethersfield village, the former Codham Mill stands beside the River Pant. The water mill, with adjoining miller's house to the right, dates from the 18th century and operated until the 20th. After many years of neglect, it has now been renovated and converted to residential property. Hundred Parishes walk number 140 goes right past it before crossing over the Pant and entering Shalford parish.



Our parish is thought to have connections with two or three 'Wethersfields' in the United States, possibly named by early emigrants to New England in the early 17th century, although this is difficult to verify. However, a more recent and entirely reliable US link is the RAF Wethersfield air base at the northern edge of the parish which was opened towards the end of WWII. It closed in 1946, re-opening in 1952 when it was allocated to the United States Army Air Forces until 1970. Since 1993 it has been under the control of the Ministry of Defence Police.

The extensive parish of Wethersfield has many quiet, undulating, winding lanes, byways, bridleways and footpaths to attract the walker and the cyclist, or even the rider. If the children are with you, try not to miss Boydells Dairy Farm, but do check the website before you visit, for Boydells is a working farm, open only in the summer months with opening times that sometimes change – www.boydellsdairy.co.uk. Lovers of dogs, cats and other small animals might also want to call in at RSPCA Danaher, in Hedingham Road - <https://danaheranimalhome.org.uk/>

If you plan to visit Wethersfield, do bring a picnic with you, for a sad sign of the times is that there are no inns or tea rooms left in the parish. Nevertheless, there is a choice of places to stay.

Hospitality:

Church Hill House B&B, High Street, CM7 4BY - 01371 850342 - www.churchhillhouse.co.uk

Upper Barns B&B, CM7 4EQ - 01371 850800 - www.upperbarns.co.uk

Six Apples self-catering, CM7 4BX - 07505 241237 - www.sixapples.co.uk/

Adjacent Hundred Parishes parishes: Shalford, Finchingfield.

Hundred Parishes Society walks include . . .

Circular walk 179 which covers 5 miles, all within the parish of Wethersfield.

Circular walk 140 which is mainly in Shalford but whose 5 miles includes part of Wethersfield.

Links:

Parish Council: <https://wethersfield-pc.gov.uk/>

Village history: <https://wethersfield-history.org.uk/>

Further reading:

In the Wake of Captain Cook - the life and times of Captain Charles Clerke, RN, 1741-1779. G Cowley and L Deacon. Richard Kay Publishers.