



The Hundred Parishes

Circular Walks – number 104

Walk in the parishes of Great Bardfield and Finchingfield through two villages and attractive countryside – 6.3 miles (10 kms)

This is a rural and village walk of varying terrain, fairly flat and generally away from busy roads. Some elements can be quite muddy in winter, so it is best tackled in summertime. The route travels clockwise, exploring much of Great Bardfield village at the beginning and end and also passing through Finchingfield village. These are both attractive and you could easily spend more time exploring either. Each village has many places of interest, a choice of establishments offering refreshment and there may be an opportunity to visit their parish churches, so please be prepared to either remove muddy boots or wear boot covers or plastic bags. Walk number 103 also visits these two parishes, exploring different paths on a shorter route.

Paths are generally well maintained although the path coming south from Finchingfield is narrow for the first half mile or so: it is often muddy in winter and shorts are not recommended in summer. The route includes one stile.

Start and finish: Great Bardfield. Park on the road somewhere near the war memorial. (Ordnance Survey Grid Reference: TL676305 - Postcode CM7 4RF).

The route can be followed on Ordnance Survey Explorer Map 195. A diagram of the route is provided at the end of the description.

Leave the war memorial area, heading slightly uphill in the direction that is not signposted, south-west. Keep to the pavement on the left, immediately passing Prancers and Gold Stones on the left. This is High Street (B1057), with all manner of interesting buildings – we will mention only a few. After a short distance, there is a blue plaque on the opposite side of the road – we will return past this shortly.

Pass The Bell and the Community Information Point on the left (during opening hours, the CIP sells a number of interesting guides to the village and its former residents, many of them noted artists of the mid-twentieth century. Immediately afterwards is Great Bardfield Town Hall. Note the parish emblem, an oxlip, high up on the front wall of the building. The oxlip is a rare native primula which grows in this parish.

After another 100 yards, we reach the tiny Great Bardfield Cottage Museum on the left. From Easter to the end of September, this is usually open without charge from 2pm to 5pm on Saturdays, Sundays and Bank Holidays.

By all means continue ahead to explore further, but our route crosses the road here to retrace on the opposite pavement.

Opposite The Bell, we pass the house on the left called Gobions, which is believed to date from early 14th century. Cross the road junction with care. Continue down the High Street past Brick House with its blue plaque. Edward Bawden lived here for 40 years, at one time sharing the house with fellow artist Eric Ravilious whose wood engraving of Great Bardfield Church has been adopted as the logo for The Hundred Parishes Society (it's at the top of page 1).

The arrival of Bawden and Ravilious triggered an influx of artists to the village. The Bardfield Artists, as they became known, held a series of "open house" exhibitions which brought many visitors in the 1950s.

Continue ahead, passing The Vine pub on the left and, on the right, Between The Lines, a bookshop whose stock includes several books about Great Bardfield, the Bardfield Artists and the local area.

At the next road junction, turn left, signposted to Finchingfield, passing more interesting and varied buildings including Great Bardfield Cage on the left, a former overnight prison cell which these days opens at the same times as the Cottage Museum.

When safe, cross the road and continue ahead along the pavement on the right.

After the red-brick terraces, we pass Piper's Meadow, a small nature reserve where the Oxlip blooms in springtime. Continue ahead on a wooden footbridge over the River Pant. The road bridge on the left dates back more than 200 years.

After the bridge, when safe, cross the road and continue in the same direction. Just after Corner Pin Cottage, turn left into Beslyns Road and continue gently uphill on this quiet lane. We will stay on it for about a mile.

After the initial climb, we follow the valley of the River Pant on our left.

After about a mile of Beslyns Road, we ignore a lane to the left, signposted to Little Bardfield. Pass Beslyns on the right and Beslyns Stable and Beslyns Cottage on the left before resuming the gentle climb past many mature oak trees. When the road levels out, ignore a public footpath on the right.

Further along, immediately before the road bends a little to the right and enters Great Pitley Farm, we turn right onto a bridleway which is called Tom's Lane. There is a hedgerow on either side. The bridleway can be muddy at times. Part way along the bridleway we cross the invisible parish boundary, passing from Great Bardfield into Finchingfield.

When the hedgerows end, keep straight ahead and pass a small wood on the right: Tom's Grove.

When the path reaches a road (Brent Hall Road, B1053), cross when safe and turn left. In about 150 yards turn right across the original roadway and pass Spinney Lodge on the right to join a gravel footpath. Descend through woodland.

When the woodland ends, keep straight ahead with a large field on the left which is often used as a campsite. We are now on the Spains Hall Estate. Continue along a gravel track.

After a while, pass through or beside a gateway and go straight ahead between several farm buildings. Pass through or beside another gateway and, about 20 yards later, turn right on the gravel driveway to continue on the public footpath. Soon, pass Dairyley Farmhouse on the right.

Over to the left, we can now see red-brick Spains Hall with its tall chimneys. This elegant, Grade I-listed building dates mostly from around 1570 AD, with part going back another hundred years. Spains Hall was the home of the Ruggles-Brise family from 1760 until 2019 when it was bought by celebrity chef Jamie Oliver. Over the centuries, members of the Ruggles-Brise family have held senior positions in political and civil life, most recently when Lady Ruggles-Brise was appointed High Sheriff of Essex in 2012. Much of the surrounding countryside is still farmed by the Ruggles-Brise family. In recent years they introduced beavers in an experiment to see how they might manage water flow, hoping to reduce the risk of flooding downstream in the village of Finchingfield.

Over to the right, the top of Finchingfield's parish church comes into view and later the white body and sails of Finchingfield's windmill.

At the end of the gravel drive, we turn right onto a wide lane, Spains Hall Road. Continue downhill on this tree-lined lane towards the village of Finchingfield.

50 yards before the lane bends right, and just before wooden fencing on the right, our route forks right onto a footpath which runs between fences.

In a hundred yards or so, we pass through a gate, veer left and immediately turn right to continue in the same direction with a hedgerow on the right.

Finchingfield Windmill, an 18th-century post mill, appears to the left. Keep straight ahead and cross a footbridge over a stream. You may find the notice here of some interest. Pass through more fields and gates to reach a road (Brent Hall Road, B1053).

Turn left and then keep to the sideroad on the left, to descend towards the war memorial and pond at the heart of Finchingfield.

This is a popular spot and the village welcomes visitors with several catering establishments. You may wish to tarry a while or explore. There are lots of interesting buildings nearby, including the windmill round to the left in The Causeway and the church, guildhall and museum up Church Hill, straight ahead. The description below takes the shortest route and does not visit these attractions.

From the war memorial, cross the main road (Bardfield Road, B1057) onto the green. Keep the pond on the left. Turn left onto the footbridge over Finchingfield Brook, which flows through the pond. Keep to the right, heading uphill towards the church for just a short distance before turning right immediately after Brick House into The Pightle, a narrow lane with red brick walls on either side.

Soon, immediately after Brook Hall on the right, turn right onto a footpath. Cross Finchingfield Brook again, and immediately turn left along a narrow footpath with a fence on either side. This path remains narrow for more than half a mile, often muddy from over-use as it squeezes between Finchingfield Brook on the left and fences on the right. We keep straight ahead.

After a while, and after leaving Finchingfield village, we pass beside some very large willow trees.

After a considerable distance, the constrained path comes out into the open. We immediately ignore a footpath that heads left over a footbridge, continuing ahead and still with Finchingfield Brook to the left. At the end of a field, the path bends to the right before turning left over a footbridge and continuing along another narrow stretch of path with fencing. We pass imperceptibly from Finchingfield back into Great Bardfield parish.

When the path reaches a shingle track, turn right and almost immediately left, keeping a hedgerow on the left. After 100 yards, ignore a path and footbridge that leave the corner of the field and stay in the field by turning right along the field edge. At the next corner, turn left over a long footbridge with a kind of stile at the far end.

After the footbridge, bear right and immediately left and pass through a gate. Pass the rusty remains of a waterwheel on the right. The substantial Great Bardfield watermill once stood over the waterwheel, three storeys high, timber-framed and weatherboarded, but it was destroyed by fire in the 1980s. Next on the right is the 18th-century former mill house

Pass beside a long, low building on the left and, just after the mill house, we turn right through a parking area to join a track with hedgerow on either side. Beware of some deep holes along this path. Pass beneath a giant oak tree on the right.

When the path reaches a field, continue ahead along the right of the field, passing the backs of houses on the right. After a while, follow the field edge and stream to left and right.

Great Bardfield windmill, an early 18th-century tower mill, now a private house, is soon clearly visible to the left.

At the end of the field, keep straight ahead with the stream immediately on the right and the backs of gardens on the left.

When the path emerges onto a road, cross with care and go straight ahead along the pavement on the left.

Pass a school and Catholic church on the left. When safe, cross the road and turn right through the lychgate into Great Bardfield churchyard. Keep straight ahead to the entrance porch.

The Grade I-listed church dates from the 12th century but is mostly from the 14th century. It is well worth a visit, noted for its Victorian stained-glass windows and particularly for the extremely rare fourteenth-century stone rood screen between the nave and the chancel, one of only three in the World (the others are in Stebbing in the Hundred Parishes and Trondheim, Norway).

After the porch, continue around the back of the church towards a small, hedged memorial garden. Pause and look back at the church's enormous blue clock. It was installed in 1912 to commemorate the coronation of King George V. You can just about discern the clock on Eric Ravillious's wood engraving on page 1 of this route description.

Continue around the church until you return to exit by the lychgate. Turn left and keep on the pavement to descend back to the centre of Great Bardfield. When you reach the small green, the church and its clock are visible up the hill to the left. At the end of the green, a fountain erected in 1860 continues to dispense water – but it is not safe to drink.

Continue ahead, with more interesting buildings on either side, towards the war memorial and your parked car.

You can read more about Great Bardfield, Finchingfield and some of their former residents, on www.hundredparishes.org.uk.

This route description, last updated 8 February 2022, was downloaded from www.hundredparishes.org.uk Please email any suggestions for improving the route or the route description to hundredparishes@btinternet.com.

A diagram covering this route, based on the Ordnance Survey map, is shown below. It is published under © Crown copyright 2020 OS 100062498.

