



The Hundred Parishes

Circular Walks – number 107

Walk in and around the town of Thaxted – 2 miles (3 kms) or 1 mile

This walk focuses on the historic centre of the small town of Thaxted which lies at the centre of the administrative parish of the same name. The parish of Thaxted had fewer than 3,000 inhabitants in 2011 but it is extremely rich in heritage. Thaxted has over 200 listed buildings, and this walk passes many, including seven which have the highest rating, Grade I. The walk should be taken slowly to best appreciate the wealth of heritage that abounds. More information and guidebooks are available from the Information Point in Town Street and from the parish church. Please be prepared to remove or cover muddy boots before entering the church or a place of refreshment.

This is a fairly hilly town, at least by Essex standards. The route is mostly along streets with a short foray onto footpaths beyond the built-up area. That element can be omitted, reducing the distance to one mile. There are several seats and no stiles.

Start and finish: Margaret Street car park which is free and has toilets. Beware that it may be busy on Friday mornings when the street market attracts extra visitors.
Ordnance Survey Grid Reference: TL611311 - Postcode CM6 2QN.

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

For centuries Thaxted was a prosperous town, first with a focus on the manufacture of cutlery in the Middle Ages and then at the centre of the local wool trade and weaving industry. Today it is a busy little town with a good range of shops and a variety of cultural activities that draw people from the surrounding area.

Leave the car park and turn right onto Margaret Street. In about 30 yards, turn left through a gateway into Margaret Gardens. Immediately bear right then left, cross a lawn and leave by the steps. Turn left into Bell Lane.

Ahead is Thaxted Church which we will return to later. On reaching the road junction, turn left into Watling Street. As we descend the hill, the names of houses or signs above their doors often reveal the trade that was once carried on there, for example Bank House and Saddlers. Almost every building along here is listed.

At the bottom of the hill, Parrishes restaurant and tea room on the left dates from the 17th century. Opposite Parrishes are four of Thaxted's Grade-I listed buildings: the Guildhall and, a little to its right, a row of three town houses in Stoney Lane. The Guildhall and the houses are all believed to have been built in the 1400s. All have their upper storeys jettied out further than the floor below. Note the solid door to the Guildhall's tiny ground floor lock-up. We will return to the Guildhall later.

Continue along the wide pavement on the left of what is now Town Street. It is here that the Friday market is held. Just past the post box and 19th-century town pump, Waylett's shop window displays a large-scale map of Thaxted.

At the road junction by the Post Office, we go straight ahead, with care crossing the road that you may have taken to drive to the car park. Go straight ahead into Orange Street, and keep to the pavement on the left.

After about 100 yards, The Old Organ Works on the right has been converted into houses. Organs were manufactured here until around 1995 and before that this was a sweet factory, founded in 1870 by George Lee.

Continue ahead, soon passing the Maypole on the left – it has been a pub for 200 years with a variety of names. We soon re-join the main road which is now called Mill End, a rather outdated name as the mill in this part of the town disappeared about 200 years ago. Continue ahead, soon reaching thatched 17th-century Corn Cottage, just before the junction with Bardfield Road.

Across the main road is one of Thaxted's town signs, featuring dancing Morris Men. Behind the sign is a modern redevelopment of a site that was once a major sweet factory. The sweet business outgrew its original premises in Orange Street and moved into the new factory which employed as many as 200 people, mainly women, in the early 20th century.

Our route turns here to go back down into the town so, when safe, cross Mill End and turn right, heading towards the distant Guildhall and Thaxted Church - an impressive sight.

Continue downhill towards the Guildhall. The Star Inn on the left started life as a hall house in the late 14th century, about the time the Guildhall was built. A first floor was inserted in the 16th century and it has been upgraded from time to time ever since.

With care, cross Park Street and continue straight ahead, now back in Town Street. Thaxted Library and Information Point on the left should have further information about the town.

Soon, we come to the former Recorder's House, number 17 on the left: a three-storey 15th-century town house with colourful coats of arms. It is said to be named after a previous owner, William Bendlowes, who was the first Recorder of Thaxted around 1600 AD – a kind of magistrate or judge appointed by the town council.

The next house has a blue plaque which records the fact that the British composer, Gustav Holst lived here from 1917 to 1925. His acknowledged masterpiece, *The Planets*, included a melody which became a hymn tune that he named "Thaxted". It is usually sung to the words "I vow to thee, my country".

The much-photographed Guildhall, straight ahead, is often open to visitors. There is some doubt about its original purpose – was it built as a meeting place for the guild of cutlers upon whom Thaxted's early wealth was founded, or was it built as a meeting place for the town council? It apparently fell into disrepair and then found a new lease of life in the 17th century, serving as a grammar school for boys and girls until 1878. Nowadays it houses a small museum and is used for town council meetings and other events.

Turn left immediately before the Guildhall into Fishmarket Street. Continue uphill and at the end of the street, after Mill House on the right, keep right along a narrow footpath, passing 17th-century, thatched Maud Lamb's Cottage on the right.

At the end of this passage, turn left onto Mill Row, now with the churchyard on the right. Continue straight ahead, through a gateway, onto a gravel path. This soon reaches the entrance to John Webb's Windmill. It was built in 1804 and served the town for about a hundred years before falling out of use, unable to compete with mills powered by steam or electricity. Since the 1930s, various organisations have restored and maintained the mill but in recent years it has suffered structural problems that have forced it to close.

[The next part of our route goes straight ahead and includes about half a mile of field paths. If you wish to avoid this section, reducing the walk distance to just one mile, retrace back down Mill Row until you reach the church. Rejoin the walk narrative near the top of the next page.]

Continue straight ahead, passing the windmill on the right and then following a hedge on the left. Over to the far right is a white water tower a little over a mile distant at Cutlers Green, a hamlet of Thaxted parish.

After about 200 yards we will turn right, but please pause for a minute.

If we were to keep ahead and somewhat right, in about half a mile we would come to the site of Thaxted's railway station. A branch line ran from Elsenham, on the London – Cambridge line, to Thaxted for around 40 years until 1952. The steam trains must have been an impressive sight. The line was known as the Gin and Toffee Line, references to one of its backers, Sir Walter Gilbey of gin fame who lived at Elsenham, and Thaxted's sweet factory. To avoid the considerable expense of crossing the valley in front of us, the line stopped short of the town and this deterred potential passengers, contributing to its demise.

Now turn right, heading downhill towards the distant water tower and with the hedgerow on the right. After the descent, follow the field round to the left. In about 50 yards turn right, cross over a stream (actually the upper reaches of the River Chelmer), and immediately turn right again. Keep to the right of the field, following the Chelmer, with a view of the windmill and church to the right.

Just after a brick and flint farm building on the right, keep right to leave the field across a bridge and go up some steps to a road. Turn right, now on Bolford Street and heading back towards the town. There is no pavement so keep to the right, facing any oncoming traffic.

Soon pass Borough Farmhouse, a timber-framed and plastered building dating from the 14th century. One of its former owners was John Webb who built Thaxted's windmill.

Towards the top of the climb, now with the church in sight, cross the road with care to walk on the pavement on the left. We pass the United Reform Church on the left, a building that dates from the 18th century. Its organ was installed in 1889 and is still in use.

Soon afterwards, at Rails Farmhouse, with care, cross back to the right side to view the Engine House, Thaxted's former fire station. Continue on this side.

Soon, turn right into the churchyard and then bear right to pass between 17th-century almshouses, heading towards the windmill. This path is Mill Row which we used earlier to

reach the windmill, so we don't need to go far before turning around to retrace between the almshouses.

[Those who took the shortcut after the windmill will rejoin the route here]

Retrace between the almshouses and, just before reaching the road, turn right, keeping the church on the right and soon reaching the church porch. Please feel free to enter (after removing or covering muddy boots) and enjoy this magnificent building, dedicated to St John the Baptist with Our Lady and St Laurence.

This is one of the largest churches in Essex and testament to the wealth of the town at the time it was built. Construction started in 1340 and was completed in 1510. Inside, you will find a wealth of literature about the church and Thaxted in general.

Perhaps the most famous of the church's vicars was Conrad Noel (1869 – 1942), the "Red Vicar", an outspoken Socialist who seemed to court controversy. He was an active church leader and worked with Gustav Holst to establish an annual festival of music which continues to this day. Conrad Noel is also credited with helping the resurgence of Morris Dancing, a pastime in which Thaxted still plays a leading role. Thaxted hosts a popular annual Morris Dance weekend in June.

As we leave the Grade I listed church through the main porch, the red-brick house opposite and to the right is Clarence House which we will return to later. Our route turns left to retrace along the path. Soon turn right to leave the churchyard, immediately opposite the Swan hotel which dates from the 17th century.

We turn left, immediately crossing Bolford Street, and then following the main road round to the right, crossing the entrance to Watling Lane. This busy corner is known as the Bullring.

Continue ahead on the main road, Newbiggen Street, keeping to the left pavement. Do take your time as you wander along this street of many colours, interesting paving and varied architecture. Almost every house is listed.

After a while, pause at number 57, Cobblers. Look over the road, slightly back, to the large cream house with a blue plaque. This was where Conrad Noel lived. We are going to turn here and retrace on the opposite side. Please cross the road with care.

There are several commemorative plaques along this side of the road recording Conrad Noel, his wife Miriam and the history of Morris Dancing.

Number 40, The Hall House 1475, is of similar vintage to its near neighbours, albeit that most have benefitted from varying degrees of modernisation over the centuries.

Cross Margaret Street and pass The Swan as we turn left onto Watling Street. There may be another photo opportunity here, looking across the road to the church, windmill and almshouses.

Continue for a little way down the hill, passing 15th-century number 24 and then another Grade I-listed building, red-brick Clarence House which was built in Queen Anne style in 1715. It has served many purposes during its 300 years and is now, once again, a private house.

Turn left into Bell Lane. The garden wall of Clarence House is the seventh Grade I listing on this walk. It was built at the same time as the house.

Continue along Bell Lane to the junction with Margaret Street. The flint and brick wall opposite surrounds a community garden and orchard, once owned by Clarence House. The entrance is just to the left and it is usually open at weekends.

Our route turns right into Margaret Street, descending and soon reaching the car park on the left where we started.

You can read more about Thaxted, Gustav Holst and Conrad Noel on www.hundredparishes.org.uk.

This route description, last updated 23 April 2022, was downloaded from www.hundredparishes.org.uk Please email any suggestions for improving the route or the route description to hundredparishes@btinternet.com.

