



The Hundred Parishes

Circular Walks – number 113

Buntingford and Wyddial - 6.4 miles (10 kms)

This clockwise walk explores older parts of the small market town of Buntingford, the tiny village of Wyddial and attractive countryside in between. Outside Buntingford, the walk is moderately hilly, mostly along clear tracks and country lanes. There are no stiles. There are places to eat and drink in Buntingford but nowhere else along the route. If you hope to visit a church, pub or café, please be prepared to either remove muddy boots or wear boot covers or plastic bags. There are several seats along the route

Start and finish: Buntingford's spacious Bowling Green Lane car park, off Baldock Road, B1038. In 2022 all-day parking cost £2.20 during the week and was free at weekends. The public toilet next to the car park no longer seems to be operational. A weekly market is held on Mondays, when the car park can be especially busy.
Ordnance Survey Grid Reference: TL360295 - Postcode: SG9 9DF.
The route can be followed on Ordnance Survey Explorer Map 194.
A diagram of the route is provided at the end of the description.

Leave the car park by the pedestrian access, in the far left corner from where you drove in. There is a helpful interpretation panel just before passing through an archway onto Buntingford's High Street.

After passing beneath the arch, just ahead and to the left is The White House, a substantial 18th-century town house. With care, cross the main road and look back at the single-handed clock above the archway. It is suspended between what is now The Buntingford Coffee Shop on the left and the former Angel Inn on the right. These two buildings date, respectively, from the 16th century and the 19th century. They are just two of more than 60 listed buildings along the High Street. We will refer to a few of them during the walk. Buntingford Civic Society has kindly installed a number of blue plaques which give brief histories.

Turn right along the High Street, with the coffee shop on the right. In Roman times this straight road was part of Ermine Street, later known as the Old North Road and designated as the A10 in the early 20th century. It was by-passed in the 1980s with a new A10. We will return along this road at the end of the walk, but please take your time and imagine what it may have been like down through all those centuries.

Almost immediately, cross Church Street on the left. In about 50 yards, we pass numbers 51 and 49 on the right, a 16th-century house, now shops, with exposed beams and a carriage entrance.

In another 50 yards, also on the right, we reach numbers 43 and 41, the former Bell Inn. This dates from the 15th century and retains its carriage entrance. Immediately opposite, on our side, there is an entrance to number 20, Layston Court which served as the town's grammar school for over 200 years until 1877. Immediately afterwards, turn left through an ornamental gateway. A narrow passageway soon brings us to tranquil Layston Court Gardens.

Follow the footpath through the gardens and leave via a footbridge that crosses the River Rib. Turn left, keeping the river on the left. Almost immediately on the right is the interesting topiary belonging to a 17th-century house called Pigs Nose. The origin of its name is not known.

Keep the river on the left until the path becomes a roadway. Bear left and soon reach another road.

Turn left and cross the cobblestone bridge. Almost immediately on the left is the tiny red-brick Cage or Lockup that dates from the early 18th century. Just ahead is The Fox and Duck which has been a pub for 300 years. We are now in Church Street; if we were to continue ahead, we would soon return to the High Street, but we are going to turn around. Retrace over the cobbled bridge and keep straight ahead. In about 50 yards turn right, ignoring the ford to the left.

Keep to the pavement on the right and head gently uphill. This road is called the Causeway and for a while it follows a high red-brick wall on the left. The wall is 300 years old and it surrounds a garden belonging to Little Court, a house which lies out of sight, beyond the garden. The house was built in the 19th century to replace an earlier one which had been demolished. Dr John Addenbrooke, a wealthy medical doctor, was a guest at the original Little Court when he died in 1719. In his will, he left £4,500 for the founding of a hospital for the poor. The hospital was founded in Cambridge and has since moved and expanded massively but continues to bear his name.

After passing a school on the right, the road becomes a rural lane. Stay on the winding lane, passing the entrance to Layston Cemetery which was opened in 2021. A little further on, we pass the old cemetery, turning left and keeping the old cemetery on the left.

Soon, we reach the entrance to Layston Church – but all is not as it may seem!

The Church of St Bartholomew dates from the 13th century and served as the parish church for Layston until it fell into disrepair; the dangerous nave roof was removed in the early 1900s. The parish of Layston included much of Buntingford - that part on the east of the High Street. The west side of the town was in the parish of Aspenden. Buntingford became an administrative parish in its own right only in the 20th century.

Layston church remained as a ruin for many years until an enterprising couple, Martin and Mandy Coulson, bought it in 2008 and, over several years, lovingly turned it into their family home. They shared the story of their project in the Buntingford Journal. Copies of those articles can be read on <http://www.layston-church.org.uk/>.

Passing St Bartholomew's, the lane becomes a bridleway and descends between fields where alpacas graze. Ignore Footpath 032 that leaves to the left.

When the bridleway reaches a lane, we turn right, keeping to the right to face any oncoming traffic.

After about 200 yards, before the lane bends to the right, when safe, we should cross to the left. Soon, our route forks left onto Bridleway 019, leaving the parish of Buntingford and entering the parish of Wyddial. We follow this bridleway for some distance, with a ditch on the left, uphill towards an electricity pylon.

The path eventually rejoins the lane we walked along earlier. Here, if we look back, we may be able to see the tower and thin spire (known as a Hertfordshire spike) of St Bartholomew's peeking above the highest trees.

Go straight ahead on the lane, ignoring the track to the left. We soon enter the village of Wyddial, the only settlement within the parish of Wyddial whose total population in 2011 was just 156.

Pass Moles Lane on the right.

We pass through a relatively modern hamlet before reaching two 17th-century houses: Keepers Cottage on the left with matching red tiled roofs on the house and the porch, and then thatched Dean House on the right. Just afterwards, the lane turns sharp left, but our route goes straight ahead onto public bridleway 018, with fences on the left and a field on the right.

After about 300 yards the path briefly joins a drive that comes in from the left. On reaching a lane, we turn left and pass some of the houses whose back gardens we saw from the footpath.

When the lane bends to the left, turn right and go through a gate beneath a horse chestnut tree into the churchyard of Wyddial's parish church of St Giles. To the right, beyond the churchyard and hidden beyond the wall, is Wyddial Hall, once the centre of a 1400-acre estate that included most of the parish. The house and land were sold in 1946 by the estate of Sir Charles Heaton-Ellis whose family had lived at the hall for 200 years.

Pass through the cemetery to the church porch. If open, the Grade I-listed church certainly merits a visit, but first please remove or cover boots if they are dirty. The church dates from the 14th century with some elements built of brick in 1532. It has exceptionally-old stained glass windows that are Flemish and date from the 16th century.

From the porch, go straight ahead and leave the churchyard through the main gateway. Immediately opposite is Wyddial Bury, dating from the 16th century. We turn right onto the lane. Very soon, just after the brick wall on the left, note the Greenwich Meridian marker. Keep straight ahead, crossing the Meridian from East to West.

Continue along the winding lane, passing the grounds of large houses over to the right and then 19th-century Old Rectory on the right with tall chimneys.

Pass the bridleway on the left that we took earlier and then pass Dean House on the left, retracing our earlier steps for about 300 yards before turning left into Moles Lane.

After a while, we pass a thatched, 16th-century cottage on the left and then the entrance to Moles Farm on the right.

We keep straight ahead on Bridleway 009 which can be muddy at times.

In a hundred yards or so, just as we arrive immediately beneath an electricity power line, we turn left and follow the fence on the left.

After about 200 yards, we follow the path round to the right. A wide bridleway joins from the left and we keep straight ahead with a ditch on the left. The wide path passes beneath the power line again and bends right.

We pass a wood (Beauchamp's Plantation) on the left and 200 yards later turn left onto a bridge over the ditch. After another 200 yards, at a T junction of paths, we turn right. If we pause at this point and look straight back the way we came, we should see the tower and Hertfordshire spike of St Bartholomew's.

On turning right, our route imperceptibly leaves Wyddial and returns to the administrative parish of Buntingford.

After climbing gently for about 600 yards, turn right past a large area of concrete hardstanding.

After about 300 yards, just as the path starts to descend, turn left onto yet another well-defined bridleway.

On reaching a road, B1038, cross with care and go straight ahead onto bridleway 24, signposted towards Owles Hall. This is the drive to Alswick.

Pass several cottages on the left before the road becomes narrower. Keep straight ahead, passing a pond and then Alswick Hall on the left. The Hall dates from the 16th century although it was largely rebuilt after a fire in 1965. The road becomes a track, passes a tennis court on the left and then climbs gently for some distance.

We pass the entrance to Owles Hall on the left and, a little further on, two stone owls on tall plinths on the right. Just afterwards, pass Owles Hall itself, just visible on the left though a gateway.

On reaching the entrances to a farm and house on the left, we turn sharp right onto a lane, Owles Lane. Over to the left can be seen the red rooftops of many 21st-century houses that were built on the site of a Sainsbury's distribution centre that had been a major local employer for around 40 years before its closure in 2003 with the loss of 800 jobs.

Stay on Owles Lane for more than half a mile as it descends to cross Haley Hill Ditch. The lane climbs before descending again into Buntingford.

When Owles Lane reaches the main road, London Road, turn right and stay on the nearside pavement.

After crossing Plashes Drive on the right, cross London Road with care. Turn next left into Aspenden Road. Pass Station Yard on the left: this was the site of Buntingford Station that marked the end of the 13-mile Buntingford branch line, a railway that ran south to join the Hertford-London line at St Margarets Station. The branch line closed in 1964 after a hundred years of operation.

When safe, cross Aspenden Road and turn right into Luynes Rise (named after a French town with which Buntingford is twinned). Soon pass The Watermill on the left: this dates from the 17th century and was once a watermill and miller's house.

Ignore the footpath on the right which crosses the River Rib and just a few yards later turn right onto Footpath 27, signposted towards Town ½ mile.

When the path forks, keep right, following the river on the right, and then keep straight ahead.

Later, we pass cottages on the left and a red-brick church on the left, immediately reaching the main road again.

[Just to the right, the main road, now called High Street, crosses the River Rib and just beyond is the Jolly Sailors pub. Behind the pub is the former workhouse.]

Turn left onto High Street and note the white milestone beside the church. This has been here since around 1742, although the metal plate indicating 31 miles to London is relatively new.

Continue around St Peter's Church. This is now the parish church but was built around 1615 as a "chapel of ease" for use by worshippers who may have struggled to reach Layston parish church, on the other side of the river and up the hill.

Turn left to pass between St Peter's and the war memorial. The splendid building ahead is Ward's Hospital, almshouses built in 1684 by Seth Ward who grew up locally and became Bishop of Salisbury.

Almost immediately, turn right and, with the almshouses on the left, continue slowly up the High Street.

Very soon, we pass an ancient pump on the right, now somewhat protected beneath a Victorian roof. We pass the Tourist Information Centre on the left and then Buntingford's town sign. The bird at the top of the sign is a bunting. We have just walked through the area where Buntingford's markets are held on Mondays.

Today's road traffic mostly turns left beside the sign, but we will go straight ahead along the High Street. So, with great care, cross the road from near the town sign to the elevated clock and then turn left. The clock was installed in 2002. Pass the 16th-century Black Bull pub on the right and then the entrance to Layston Court on the right.

In another 100 yards cross the High Street to turn left beneath the one-armed clock towards the car park. You may now wish to study both sides of the interpretation panel.

This has been only a short introduction to Buntingford and Wyddial. You can read more about them on www.hundredparishes.org.uk.

This route description, last updated 16 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.

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

