



The Hundred Parishes

Circular Walks – number 121

Sawbridgeworth: a short stroll in and around the town: 2.2 miles (4 kms)

This clockwise walk explores the older parts of the small town at the heart of the Hertfordshire parish of Sawbridgeworth and includes a section of towpath along the River Stort. The route is a mixture of busy roads, quiet streets and footpaths and the towpath. There are no stiles. Longer routes starting from Sawbridgeworth Station can be downloaded from the Station Walks section of www.hundredparishes.org.uk.

Start and finish: There is large signposted car park off Bell Street. Bell Street runs one-way, eastwards off London Road, A1184 and the car park entrance is soon on the right. This route starts from the parking area on the right soon after entering the car park. There are toilets further along the car park, round to the left, near the car park exit. Ordnance Survey Grid Reference: TL482148 - Postcode: CM21 9AQ.

The route can be followed on Ordnance Survey Explorer Map 194.

A diagram of the route is provided at the end of the description.

Before setting out, have you visited the ticket machine and either paid and displayed or presented your card to pay later? Leave the car park the way you came in, along the path to the left of the ticket machine, passing a small green on the left.

On reaching the road, Bell Street, straight ahead is 300-year-old Red House, one of more than 150 listed buildings in the parish. We will see nearly half on this stroll – but mention only a limited number. When safe, cross the road and turn left.

Pause at the corner with the main road, London Road. On the left is the White Lion Hotel which dates back to the 16th century. Our corner includes the free-standing town sign and Sawbridgeworth's coat of arms, high up on a wall. Turn right along busy London Road. This has been a major through route for hundreds of years and was recognised as such when it became a turnpike in 1744. Sawbridgeworth stands on three major north-south transport corridors, the road, the London-Cambridge railway and Stort Navigation canal. The town's evolution has largely centred around activities which have taken advantage of those transport links.

We will pass briskly along busy London Road, pausing after about 300 yards beside the white weather-boarded house on the right which dates from the 17th century or earlier and has since been subdivided into numbers 62 to 66.

Continue ahead and soon turn right into Station Road. After another 200 yards turn right into Knight Street. Please pass along this street more slowly to appreciate the relatively upmarket dwellings and variety of architectural styles and colours. For example, number 19 on the left is an early 19th century Regency house that retains much of its original style.

Further along, the Fawbert and Barnard Infants School takes its title from a trust established by George Fawbert, a Hertfordshire maltster who died in 1824, and the executor of his will, John Barnard. The 1895 building replaced an earlier one.

When safe, use the pedestrian crossing and then continue on the left side of Knight Street.

A group of three buildings on the right - The Tudor House, number 40 and The Market House - all date from the 16th century. The original use of The Market House is unknown but in relatively recent times its functions have included nursing home, restaurant and carpet warehouse before becoming a private house. The Market House stands on the corner of Knight Street and Bell Street.

At the corner, turn left into Church Street and head towards the church. On the left, the red-brick shop dated 1905 is the former fire station. On the right is 17th-century Church House, tall with white weatherboarding and interesting windows. Once a workhouse and then a school, it now functions as a church hall.

Pass through the gate into the churchyard and turn left immediately along a footpath, passing the church on the right – we will return! Exit the churchyard and continue straight ahead passing on the left the Fawbert and Barnard Library, now the parish hall, and then the playground for the infants school.

The path soon reaches a road, The Forebury. Bear right and then turn left into Sayes Gardens. Pass one house on the right and then turn right into a narrow public footpath, descending with wooden fencing on either side.

Just before the footpath reaches Station Road, number 92 on the right is quite unusual: 17th-century, thatched and with large raised roundels decorating its plastered wall. Cross Station Road with care and continue ahead into Leat Close and then Mill Lane.

Keep to the right, descending Mill Lane. Pass weather-boarded Mill House on the left and immediately cross over a stream which, on the left, it is now a lily pond. Then pass the former grain store on the right, now called The Cornmill. These two buildings date from the 18th century and survive from a fire in the 1970s that destroyed the mill itself.

Almost immediately reach the River Stort and turn left. Pass housing on the left and turn right across a bridge over Sawbridgeworth Lock. The lock is one of 15 that were constructed when the river was canalised in 1769 for 14 miles between Bishop's Stortford and Hoddesdon. This navigable stretch of the river is officially called Stort Navigation.

Turn right onto the towpath and continue along it until it reaches a road (Station Road again). With care, cross the road and turn right on the pavement. Cross the river and turn left to re-join the towpath, now with the canal on the left. Take extra care if the path is muddy or slippery.

We pass extensive former maltings buildings on the other side of the canal. They were built in the second half of the 19th century and provided much employment until the early 20th century. Being on the other side of the river, the maltings are in the adjoining parish of Sheering in the county of Essex. They have now been converted to a variety of new uses.

Next on the left we pass a relatively modern residential area that was built partly on the site of the Walter Lawrence & Son factory which manufactured the wooden fuselages for hundreds of Mosquito aircraft for the RAF during World War II.

The towpath passes Sheering Mill Lock just before reaching a road, Sheering Mill Lane.

Turn right. Immediately opposite is Lock Cottage which bears the inscription “GD 1799”, presumably in deference to Sir George Duckett (1725 – 1822) who was the main driving force behind construction of the Stort Navigation. Duckett was previously called George Jackson before changing his name in order to comply with the terms of the will of his wife’s uncle and thereby benefit from the will.

The welcoming “Hertfordshire” sign doesn’t really apply to us as we have never left the county. Its boundary with Essex runs down the centre of the canal.

Pass Fairway on the left and almost immediately turn right onto Public Footpath 27, signposted towards Church Street. The footpath soon reaches Forebury Avenue but we turn left to continue along the footpath. Soon, our path runs for a short distance beside Forebury Avenue. We keep straight ahead on the path, passing several houses faced with flintstone on the left.

The path enters the churchyard. Almost immediately bear left, passing three WWI war graves, to reach a larger memorial beneath an oak tree. This commemorates John Strange, 5th Earl of Roden, who served in the Crimean War in the 1850s. Inside the church is a brass plaque to another Sawbridgeworth veteran of the Crimean War who is buried in the churchyard: Joseph Vick who was one of the survivors from the ‘Charge of the Light Brigade’ at Balaclava in 1854, a disastrous British assault on the Russian enemy that was immortalised in verse by Alfred Lord Tennyson.

Return to the main path and turn left, soon reaching the Parish Church of Great St Mary. It dates from the 13th century and is mainly faced in flintstone, with the exception of the brick stair turret that was added in the 16th century. Like almost all churches, this one merits a visit. It has an outstanding collection of memorials of the highest artistic quality. Many have a modern explanatory notice nearby.

Leave the church and continue to the right, passing the 1899 Mann Memorial Almshouses on the left and then Sawbridgeworth’s war memorial. Leave the churchyard through the gateway (we came through in the opposite direction about 2 miles ago). Pass Church House on the left and turn left into Vantorts Road – Vantort was the name of a Sawbridgeworth land-owning family from as long ago as the early 14th century.

Pass several interesting and ancient properties on the left, including the modernised 16th-century Fair Green House which stands opposite Fair Green on the right. This green was the location since 1447 AD for regular hiring fairs, the medieval equivalent of today’s recruitment agencies. Turn right and walk around the Green, passing more interesting buildings on the left and an unusual double-spouted pump, around 200 years old, on the right.

Almost immediately, we reach The Square, a tiny ‘square’. With care, cross to the left and soon turn left into Bell Street, now with The Market House on the right. This is the retail heart of Sawbridgeworth with a variety of tempting shops and dining opportunities, mostly in listed buildings that range from the 15th to the 18th centuries. The age of the buildings tends to be indicated by the roofline rather than the shop windows. Please take your time.

The oldest building is numbers 21 and 23 on the right: a 15th-century hall house with 19th-century brick front, now divided into two premises. Soon afterwards, turn left into the exit from the car park. Walk straight ahead, past toilets on the left. Ahead is Sayesbury Manor, the building now occupied by Sawbridgeworth Town Council.

Sayesbury Manor dates from around 1780 AD and has an elaborate Gothic porch. Turn right to the part of the car park where this stroll started.

Before you drive away, please complete the car park transaction if you presented a card to pay later.

You can read more about Sawbridgeworth on www.hundredparishes.org.uk.

This route description, last updated 03 October 2021, 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.

