



The Hundred Parishes

Circular Walks – number 167

Littlebury – 1.4 miles (2 kms)

This short walk explores the village of Littlebury, passing the majority of the parish's 66 listed buildings and offering a brief explanation of changes to transport infrastructure that have occurred over the last 200 years. The route is mostly on quiet residential lanes plus short stretches of footpath and B1383. There are no stiles. The route starts beside Littlebury's parish church so please be prepared, before entering, to either remove muddy boots or wear boot covers or plastic bags. In 2021 there was nowhere to get refreshment in the village, although it is hoped that the Queen's Head may reopen.

Start and finish: There is usually space to park beside the churchyard wall in Mill Lane at the southern end of Littlebury village, just off the B1383. The route starts from the gate to the churchyard.

Ordnance Survey Grid Reference: TL518395 - Postcode: CB11 4TT.

The route can be followed on Ordnance Survey Explorer Map 195.

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

Before setting off, you might like to visit Littlebury Church if it is open and while your boots are clean. The main access is through the gate near the corner at the crossroads.

Holy Trinity Church is listed at Grade I for its architectural and historic value. It was built of flint and stone, mostly in the 13th century with the tower added a hundred years later. The southern doorway dates from around 1200 AD. Of particular interest inside is the 13th-century font and its 16th-century carved wooden canopy. The church was probably altered during the 'restoration' of the 1870s. The belltower has 6 bells that mostly date from the 18th century and there is another bell on the roof of the tower which strikes on the hour.

After visiting the church, retrace from the porch to the gateway. From here we turn left onto the raised pavement and head east along Mill Lane. We walk beside the churchyard's flintstone wall as the road descends.

When the pavement ends, with care cross the road to the right, facing any oncoming traffic. Ahead, we get a good view of the 18th-century, three-storey mill house. Adjoining it to the right is the mill. Both buildings date from the 18th century and both are of timber-frame construction. The mill house, Kings Mill, has been plastered and painted white/cream; the mill is weatherboarded and painted black. Each building has a mansard roof - a two-sided roof with two slopes on each side.

The River Cam passes beneath the mill to provide renewable energy for the mill. The mill ceased to operate in 1924. The river flows from our right, beneath the mill, and then heads north through Cambridge, later joining the River Great Ouse and flowing into the North Sea at The Wash. For a while, early in the 20th century, the mill was run as a guesthouse and tea room and later it became the home of Dorothy, Lady Braybrooke after the death of her husband, the 7th Lord Braybrooke, in 1941. She lived here until 1971.

Beyond the mill, we pass a variety of houses on each side of the road, mostly dating from the 18th century.

At the road junction, we turn right into Walden Road, passing another 18th century building, Riverside Cottage, on our right. After only a few yards, we will pause on the bridge before retracing. The bridge crosses the Cam; to the right is a weir. When safe, we will cross the road and retrace on the other side, now with a flint wall on our right.

We pass the junction with Mill Lane on our left. On the right, Midsummer House dates from about 1600 AD. The house and surrounding land were owned by the Braybrooke family of Audley End House from 1770 until the mid-20th century when part of the land was given by Lord Braybrooke as a site for the village hall and the house sold. Littlebury's village hall is next on the right.

Most houses along Walden Road date from the 18th or 19th century.

On the right, Folly Cottage with the jettied upper storey was built in the 17th century.

When our pavement runs out we should cross, when safe, to continue along the pavement on the left. There is an attractive view back.

On the right, The Thatched Cottage dates from the 18th century.

On the left, behind white railings, Ring Hill and adjacent number 2, The Old Priest House, date from the early 16th century and are jettied out over the pavement.

Next on the left, we pass Bakers Row: a block of four 17th or 18th-century cottages constructed in an L shape.

Before reaching the junction, we will cross to the right, where Littlebury's village sign is positioned in a raised, walled garden. The sign has different pictures on the two sides, each depicting a horse-drawn cart outside the mill. The buildings look familiar, but their juxtaposition seems inconsistent. Beneath the name, the shears replicate wood carving on the 15th-century north door of the parish church.

We turn right on the B1383, here called Cambridge Road. Immediately to the right is Littlebury Farmhouse, probably from the 18th century. This is followed by Wheelwrights Cottage, also 18th century, thatched with three 'eyebrow' windows peeping from the thatch.

We will turn around here and retrace.

Just before reaching the village sign, there should be an adequate view of road traffic in both directions. When safe, we will cross to the other side of the main road and turn left beside another flint wall on our right. Across the main road, High Street, are several cottages that date from the 18th or 19th centuries; they include The Old Post Office and The Old Telegraph House, each of which once served as the village post office.

On our side of the road, we pass 16th/17th-century Parrishes, a former farmhouse whose first floor is jettied over the pavement. We pass the former telephone kiosk and keep to the right, leaving the main road (we will return to this corner later). We pass Kent's Farm on the right and a small traffic island on the left. Straight ahead is The Gatehouse, dating from the 16th century and probably on the site of a 13th-century building that was owned by the Bishop of Ely.

We turn right into Strethall Road, noting the large stone beside the corner of Kents Farm, no doubt positioned there to prevent cart wheels from damaging the building.

Strethall Road climbs steadily, past houses that are relatively new, either from the 20th or 21st century.

We will pause at the top of the hill beside the parking area on the right where the road turns left. Behind, we look down on the tower of Littlebury Church.

Through a gap in the hedge on our right, we can see the valley of the River Cam as it heads north. Pylons supporting a power transmission line climb the hill to the east. Beyond the pylons, at the top of the hill, we can see buildings at Chesterford Research Park, about 2 miles away.

We follow the road round to the left, when safe pausing to look over the wall. Beneath us is the West Anglia railway line. To the right it heads towards Cambridge and to the left towards London. To the left, we can see where the track runs through a tunnel. The tunnel is about 300 yards long and one of two that enabled the line to negotiate the hilly terrain to the west of the Cam valley rather than go past Audley End House. It was the only way that Baron Braybrooke, the owner of the Audley End estate, would allow the railway to be constructed through his land in the 1840s.

We continue along the road, passing La Rochelle on the left. Immediately afterwards, we turn left into Field View, signposted as a byway. The smooth tarmac byway leads past a few new houses and then becomes a more traditional path, continuing to descend with hedgerows on each side.

The path drops down to the level of the railway line just on our left and then reaches a pedestrian crossing over the line. With extreme caution, look, listen and when safe use the pedestrian crossing.

At the far side, we have a closer view of the tunnel ahead. Looking back, we can see the bridge which we crossed a few minutes ago.

We join a lane. For a while in the 19th/20th century this was called Factory Lane and there was a railway halt here to service a chaff factory which processed straw and chaff from cereal crops to make forage for horses. Today, all the buildings are residential, mostly from the 20th and 21st centuries, and Factory Lane has reverted to its pre-industrial name, Peggy's Walk.

After all the newer houses, we reach a high flint wall on our left, constructed of flintstone and brick in the 19th century. This is the boundary wall of Granta House which we will glimpse later.

At the end of Peggy's Walk, we reach a junction with Littlebury Green Road. Before proceeding, we should consider how this appeared 200 years ago. Today's B1383, formerly the A11, approaches Littlebury from the south, from Audley End House, along a straight section of road for half a mile, quite out of character compared with the typical winding roads of this area. That stretch of road, the Littlebury straight, was built only in 1811. Before then, the north-south road was positioned about 200 yards further west. It came from the south (straight ahead of us) to where we are now standing and turned right, downhill towards Littlebury Church.

We will now follow the course of the old main road. When safe, we cross to the opposite side and turn left. There are flint walls on both sides of the road.

Shortly before the junction with the B1383, when safe, we will cross to the left to get a peek through the wall of the flint and brick outbuildings of Granta House. We will stay on this side up to the junction.

Soon, we meet the B1383 at a crossroads, with Mill Lane and Littlebury Church opposite. We will pause here on the corner. Prior to 1811, the main road (that we have just come along) turned left beside the church; there was no road to the right. For around a hundred years, from the 1670s to the 1780s the view ahead would have been of the parish church to the left and Henry Winstanley's house to the right.

Henry Winstanley was born in Saffron Walden and became Clerk of Works at Audley End House. He built his own, rather grand, house here in extensive grounds. Winstanley was an architect and inventor, most famed for designing and building the first Eddystone Lighthouse, off the coast of Cornwall, in the 1690s. His home and grounds included a model of the lighthouse and a great number of other unusual inventions including trick chairs. It became known as Winstanley's House of Wonders, attracting paying guests, a kind of 17th-century Disneyland. Winstanley died in 1703 during a visit to Eddystone Lighthouse. A great storm washed the lighthouse and Winstanley away. His House of Wonders was demolished in the 1780s.

Today, we turn left onto the High Street, keeping on the left pavement, to complete our exploration of the older parts of Littlebury.

Immediately, on the right we have a good view of the parish church and war memorial.

On the left, we soon come to Granta House, painted white and symmetrical with two wings. It has 16th-century origins and functioned as The Falcon Inn in the 17th and 18th centuries. It was largely rebuilt in the 19th century as a private residence. A building further along the road near the bend subsequently opened as a new Falcon Inn. That building was destroyed in 1958 when a lorry carrying propane gas overturned on the bend, crashing into the pub and setting it alight. Fortunately, nobody was killed.

Next on the left is School House with ornamental railings. This building was constructed in 1865 as a school to serve 160 pupils of all ages. It functioned until 1970 when it was converted into a house. Pupils were then expected to attend school in Great Chesterford.

Next comes High House, a distinctive building with much glass facing the main road. Its appearance seems unchanged from the image that appeared on postcards a hundred years ago. Despite their unusual appearances, neither High House nor School House are listed buildings.

Opposite, behind railings, are South House and then North House. They were created in the 1950s when the ancient Vicarage was divided in two. The Vicarage was built around 1520 as a hall house, having one large room that extended from the ground to the roof and a central fire whose smoke would drift upwards and out through vents in the roof. Later, chimneys were added at each end and a floor was inserted to create an upper storey.

Next on the left, 19th-century Mill Cottage stretches back a long way from the road.

Next on the left is 17th-18th-century Squirrels, with appropriate motifs in the parquetry.

This is followed by The Long House, 16th or 17th century with jettied upper storey, then 17th-century The Little House, and then pink 17th century Beech Cottage.

Opposite is The Queen's Head, a pub that dates from the 18th century or earlier.

Outside Beech Cottage, when safe, we should cross to the traffic island (whose plants almost hide the old village pump). Opposite, the upper storey of 16th/17th-century Barton House is jettied over the pavement. It was probably built as a meeting house and later used as an almshouse.

At the far end of the traffic island there is a fair view of traffic in both directions. From here, when safe, we cross the main road to Barton House and turn right.

After passing The Queen's Head, we reach the entrance to The Old Coach House. This was built in the 1850s for the vicar's coach, horses and coachman. The small building in front, beside the pavement, was constructed about the same time and served at different times as a reading room for various groups of Littlebury residents. Looking back, there is a good view of the buildings we have just passed on the west side of the road.

Next, we get a closer look at North House and South House on the left. The pavement narrows for a short distance before we turn left through a gateway into the churchyard.

We follow the gravel path round to the left and soon reach the north porch where careful inspection of the 15th-century door will be rewarded with sight of the original carved shears. We continue to follow the gravel path round the church to the main south porch. If you didn't visit the church at the beginning of this walk, there may now be another chance if it is open.

On leaving the south porch, go straight ahead on the gravel path, passing the war memorial. There is another view of Granta House, across the road to the right.

When we reach the main gateway, we will pause for a moment to reflect on what once lay ahead of us in the meadow opposite - Henry Winstanley's "House of Wonders".

We turn left to where we parked before starting this walk.

You can read more about Littlebury and Henry Winstanley on www.hundredparishes.org.uk.

Some of the information in this route description has been gleaned from *Littlebury: a Parish History*, an outstanding book published in 2005 by Littlebury Millennium Society History Group (ISBN 0-9543910-1-2).

This route description, last updated 28 August 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.

