



The Hundred Parishes

An introduction to

FINCHINGFIELD



Location: 9 miles northeast of Great Dunmow. **Ordnance Survey grid square:** TL6832.
Postcode: CM7 4JS. **Access:** B1053, B1057; bus services 9 and 10 (Braintree – Finchingfield)
County: Essex. **District:** Braintree. **Population:** 1,471 in 2011.

If ever there was a village which merited the (albeit rather corny) epithet ‘chocolate box’, it must surely be Finchingfield. Set in one of the larger Essex parishes, Finchingfield village is one of the most photographed, filmed, drawn and painted locales of our Hundred Parishes domain, its images having appeared, over the years, on television, tea towels, calendars, jigsaw puzzles and, indeed, chocolate boxes. It is not difficult to see why, for in spite of its popularity and ease of access in these motorised times, it is little changed from the earliest photographs and paintings,



and little damaged by the commerce and tourism of our age. It retains a very real olde-world charm, and is perhaps most people’s idea of what a typical English village should be: it has a duck pond at its centre on the village green, a narrow bridge over the river, one road rising to the parish church on the hill, another to the windmill; it has the tea room, the old inn, the antique shop, and everywhere the beams, thatch, gentle pastel shades and quirky lopsidedness of houses which have stood for centuries (some since the 16th), every one unique. Many are listed; in fact, there are well over 100 listed buildings across the broader parish.

Fincingfelda (the fields of Finc’s people), as it was known in the days of William the Conqueror, has been a settlement since Roman times. It was an official stop for horse-drawn carriages en route between London and Norwich, a fact underlined even today by the number of hostelries in what is only a small rural community. The Red Lion is 15th century, the Fox Inn 16th, the Three Tuns 18th. In these days when rural inns are disappearing year on year, it is perhaps a testament to Finchingfield’s abiding appeal that three public houses in such close proximity to each other can not only survive but thrive. All offer bed and breakfast as well as meals. And for the visitor just passing through there is Bosworths’ Tea Room and The Picture Pot café, as well as a shop and post office.

Pre-dating even the Red Lion and only a stone’s throw across the road is the parish church of St John the Baptist. The church grounds are entered through the ancient archway of the Guildhall, a recently renovated 15th-century Grade I-listed building which now houses a library, shop and a small museum. St John’s dates from Norman times and offers tangible evidence of every century from that to this; a detailed description can be found at <http://stepneyrobarts.blogspot.co.uk/p/essex.html>.



The road screen has been described as one of the finest and most elaborate in the county. The north chapel of the church is dedicated to one William Kempe who died in 1628. His memorial plaque is something of a curiosity, not just because it is surrounded and somehow thus diminished by many plaques pertaining to various members of the notable Finchingfield Ruggles-Brise family. Most memorial inscriptions, ancient and modern, would suggest to their readers that the person so celebrated was something of a saint. This one is rather different, recording publicly and for ever his imperfection. It seems that Kempe made an unfounded accusation of unfaithfulness in regard to his wife, and with troubled

conscience and repentant heart he made a vow 'by a voluntary constancy to hold his peace seven years'. A rare humility, and an unusual find.

One only has to read the other memorial tablets filling the wall space of the Kempe Chapel to become aware of the major contribution of the Ruggles-Brise family to public life generally and to the history of Essex and Finchingfield parish in particular. The 15th-century Spains Hall, a little to the north of Finchingfield village, has been the family estate since 1760. It remains so, although it is probably better known today for its function as a wedding venue.

Men of the family over the last 200 years have held very senior positions in political and civic life. Samuel, Edward and John were all knights of the realm and served in local government, as members of parliament and with distinction in the military. Evelyn (also knighted) was a prison reformer and founder of the Borstal system for young offenders. The name and its attachment to civic service continue to this day, Lady Rosemary Ruggles-Brise holding the post of High Sheriff of Essex as recently as 2012.

One of Finchingfield's roads is named after its Nonconformist 17th-century vicar, Stephen Marshall. He was a powerful and influential puritan preacher, addressing the House of Commons several times to advocate church reform. He was buried in Westminster Abbey, but after the restoration of the monarchy his remains, along with those of other supporters of Oliver Cromwell, were removed to a communal, unmarked grave.



Finchingfield is a beautiful place. With its gently-undulating terrain, it is worth exploring the wider parish on foot or by cycle. Quiet lanes and footpaths abound; there are some great walks to be found on the Walk4Life website (see link below), which are helpfully circular and will enable you to take in nearby hamlets and villages such as Wethersfield, Little Sampford and Great Bardfield. It is probably a good idea not to visit the village on a summer Sunday

afternoon (unless you have a particular yen to get in to the old post mill, which opens once a month on Sundays). It has to be acknowledged that the world likes to descend upon Finchingfield on warm, sunny weekends! But if you can plan your visit away from peak times, you will see it at its best, the residents will be grateful, and you may actually be able to park.

Hospitality:

Bosworth's Tea Room & Restaurant – 01371 810605 - www.bosworthstearooms.co.uk

The Fox Inn – 01371 810151 - www.thefoxinnfinchingfield.co.uk

The Horse & Groom, Cornish Hall End – 01799 586306 - www.thehorseandgroom.org

The Picture Pot café – 01371 811009

The Red Lion – 01371 810400

The Three Tuns – 01371 810165 - <http://threetunsfinchingfield.com>

Zafra restaurant – 01371 810501

Adjacent parishes:

Great Bardfield, The Sampfords, Hempstead, Steeple Bumpstead, Wethersfield, Shalford.

Links:

Parish Council: www.finchingfield-pc.gov.uk

Roger Beckwith's personal view: www.finchingfield.org.uk

Finchingfield Guildhall: www.finchingfieldguildhall.org.uk

Spains Hall: www.spainshall.co.uk

Film of village life in 1937: <http://player.bfi.org.uk/film/watch-around-the-village-green-1937>

Stephen Marshall:

http://archive.org/stream/stephenmarshallf00vaugrich/stephenmarshallf00vaugrich_djvu.txt

Walk4Life: www.walk4life.info/

Further reading:

A Family Story: The Ruggles of Spains Hall, Finchingfield, Edith Freeman