



The Hundred Parishes

An introduction to

HATFIELD BROAD OAK



Location: 5 miles southeast of Bishop's Stortford. **Ordnance Survey grid square:** TL5416.

Postcode: CM22 7HE. **Access:** B183. Bus: 347 (Harlow, Sawbridgeworth).

County: Essex. **District:** Uttlesford. **Population:** 1,276 in 2011.



The quaintly-named Hatfield Broad Oak is one of the largest parishes in Essex. It has had a number of other names over the centuries, all double-barrelled, perhaps to ensure that it is recognised as distinct from two other Essex Hatfields – Heath and Peverel. It has been known as Hatfield Chipping, Hatfield Regis and even King's Hatfield, the two latter presumably in deference to the parish's royal patronage in its early history. Although today usually affectionately referred to by locals as HBO, the name Hatfield Broad Oak was first recorded in the 12th century, and reference to the 'broad oak' whence it derives, in the 13th. There appears to be some

dispute among authorities about the specific oak in question. Some believe it to be the well-known 'Doodle Oak' of Hatfield Forest; others think it was a different tree sited closer to the village. We will probably never know, but it is intriguing to speculate.

The legendary Doodle Oak, one of the broadest trees ever measured in England, has its own enigmatic etymology. The National Trust, owner of Hatfield Forest since 1924, has suggested one or two possible origins, but thinks that it probably derives from the word 'doodlesack', which is the bag of a bagpipe. Photos and drawings of the tree show a huge, bulbous base to the trunk and a lopsided narrowing nearer the top under the canopy; it's a good descriptor. The Doodle Oak lived for around 900 years until the 1850s when it last produced leaves. Its stump survived for another 100 years but is no longer visible, although a young oak tree, possibly a coppice shoot attached to the old root, lives on. As it grows it seems to be taking the same shape as the original, and is being nurtured in the hope that it will live as long as its parent.



The parish embraces most of the 1000+ acres of Hatfield Forest, which is a rare example of a medieval royal hunting forest, its ancient woodlands being created around 1100 by Henry I. Some trees remain from that era, having acquired fantastic shapes as they have aged and weathered over the centuries (see the Rowley Gallery for some wonderful photographic examples - link below). The forest is a haven for nature lovers, fishermen and ramblers. You might have to search hard for the deer and cattle, who mostly make their own decisions about which parts of the forest they frequent, but the lake, the curious 1759 Shell House (shown here), the Discovery Centre and, importantly, the Forest Cafe, are all central and easily accessed. Bear in mind the weather and dress accordingly if you plan to avail yourself of the cafe, as you will be eating al fresco.



Serious walkers might want to pick up the long-distance Three Forests Way and follow it through to Hatfield Broad Oak where it bisects the village on its way towards Ongar. But there are many footpaths criss-crossing the parish which are worthy of exploration. Planned walks around the area can be downloaded from one of the walking website links below; just key in Hatfield Broad Oak. For the seriously energetic, we must not forget the HBO 10k Road Race, which has become such a notable local annual event that it has its own website. Run every May bank holiday, it follows a figure-of-eight route through the quiet lanes of the area, and is a great way to see the parish at its scenic best. For those wanting quieter pursuits, the flower festival of the parish church is held on the same day.



The church of St Mary the Virgin is a Grade I-listed building on the site of all that remains of a 12th-century Benedictine priory, dissolved by Henry VIII in 1564. The original nave of the priory church forms part of the present church, which is predominantly 15th-century, perhaps most notably the west tower, now containing eight bells. There has been much 18th-century renovation. Artefacts of particular interest are the early 18th-century reredos and chancel panelling, candelabra and a curious stone effigy of Robert de Vere, of the family who founded the original priory. Poor Robert has lost his face and has been destined to recline for all time in the most uncomfortable position imaginable. Also worth

investigating is the unusual 18th-century library, built to house rare antiquarian theological books.

The village of Hatfield Broad Oak was, in medieval times, a thriving market town and retains its early street pattern today. It is now a conservation area with many listed buildings, and architecture representing every century from the 14th onwards.

For a small rural village, Hatfield Broad Oak is without doubt gastronomically extremely well-provided, with the Cock Inn, originally an 18th-century coaching inn, the Duke's Head, a corner shop and the village's own purveyor of quality sausages at Broad Oak Farm.

Hospitality:

Cock Inn – 01279 718306 - www.thecockinn-hatfieldbroadoak.co.uk

Duke's Head – 01279 718598 - www.thedukeshead.co.uk

Adjacent parishes: Hatfield Heath, Little Hallingbury, Great Hallingbury, Takeley, Great Canfield, High Roding, White Roding.

Links:

Parish Council: www.hatfieldbroadoakofficialsite.co.uk

History: www.recordinguttlesfordhistory.org.uk/hatfieldbroadoak/hboindex.html

British History Online: www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=63851

HBO 10km run: www.hbo-10k.org.uk/

Broad Oak Farm: www.broadoakfarm.com/

Rowley Gallery: <http://blog.rowleygallery.co.uk/hatfield-forest-hatfield-broad-oak>

Walks Around Stortford: www.walksaroundstortford.org.uk

Essex Walks: www.essexwalks.com

Further Reading

The Last Forest, the story of Hatfield Forest, Oliver Rackham

Hatfield Broad Oak Conservation Area Appraisal: Available at www.uttlesford.gov.uk/caa