



# The Hundred Parishes

An introduction to

## NUTHAMPSTEAD



**Location:** 5 miles northeast of Buntingford. **Ordnance Survey grid square:** TL4134.

**Postcode:** SG8 8NG. **Access:** east off B1368.

**County:** Hertfordshire. **District:** North Herts. **Population:** 142 in 2011.

Nuthampstead is a tiny rural community, rather off the beaten track on the chalk uplands near the Hertfordshire border with Essex. It has probably always been like that except for a period of three years in the 1940s when it was home to thousands of Americans during World War II.

It was in 1942 that farmland was requisitioned for use by the United States. Within 12 months, three runways had been constructed and the highest airfield in East Anglia, 140 metres or 460 feet above sea level, became operational. This was at a time of international emergency when commissions and planning inspectors were unheard of, and Nuthampstead was just one of many airfields built by American civil engineering battalions in East Anglia during that year.

Around 250,000 Americans were based on these airfields, with 3,000 at Nuthampstead, which was officially Station 131 but soon became known as 'Mudhampstead'. Relatively few men were pilots, but they required substantial manpower support both in the air and at the base.

The first occupants were the 55th Fighter Group, equipped with P-38 Lightning fighter planes, but after 6 months they were relocated to make way for the 398th Bomb Group. The 398th arrived at the base in April 1944 with brand new B-17G Flying Fortress bombers. They were part of the highly co-ordinated American 8th Air Force which operated from many airfields.

A typical mission would involve aircraft taking off every 30 seconds and gathering into formation before meeting with other groups until a giant stream of bombers, up to 140 miles long and 1,200 in number, would head out to release their bombs on enemy targets.

The last mission was on 25th April 1945 and the war in Europe ended two weeks later. The air base was closed in June 1945, but Nuthampstead was then used as a base for consolidating surplus war material before it was dumped in the North Sea.

A total of 58 B-17 bombers from Nuthampstead were lost in action. Over 300 airmen died and a similar number were taken prisoner.

These memorials were erected in 1982 and 2006.

A plan to erect a museum at the rear of the Woodman Inn is being progressed.



The airfield was de-commissioned by 1953, but was then chosen in 1968 as one of the options to be considered by the Roskill Commission as a possible site for London's third airport, a fate which Nuthampstead avoided, but which later fell upon Stansted.

The airfield is not altogether peaceful. Although the main runways have been removed, there are still grass runways and service roads to allow use by light aircraft. The airfield is also the site of the 'Barkway beacon', part of the national system of radio navigation for aircraft. Another part of the site has been taken over by a shooting club and is used for major championships.

This has been the story of one wartime airfield. There were thirteen within the Hundred Parishes.

Today, Nuthampstead is once again a basically peaceful, rural community. The village and surrounding area are served by the Woodman Inn public house and restaurant, shown here. The Hertfordshire Way long-distance footpath conveniently passes its door. The thatched part of the building dates back to the 17th century. Outside are the memorials to the American airmen who served or died.



Elsewhere, this small community has its fair share of lovely listed buildings. There are a dozen altogether, mostly dating from the 17th century, and mostly timber-framed and thatched. Unusually, the parish has no church.



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#### **Hospitality:**

The Woodman Inn, SG8 8NB - 01763 848328 - <http://thewoodman-inn.co.uk>

**Adjacent parishes:** Anstey, Barkway, Barley, Langley, Meesden.

#### **Links:**

Parish: No website.

398th Bomb Group Memorial Association: [www.398th.org](http://www.398th.org)

55th Fighter Group: [www.55th.org](http://www.55th.org)

Nuthampstead Airfield, Station 131 - [www.station131.co.uk](http://www.station131.co.uk)

Nuthampstead Airfield Museum (open by appointment only):

<http://nuthampsteadairfieldmuseum.webs.com> or email [geoff.rice@gmail.com](mailto:geoff.rice@gmail.com)

Nuthampstead Shooting Ground: [www.clayshoot.biz](http://www.clayshoot.biz)