



The Hundred Parishes

An introduction to

WETHERSFIELD



Location: 6 miles northwest of Braintree. **Ordnance Survey grid square:** TL7131. **Postcode:** CM7 4BZ. **Access:** B1053. Buses: 16 Chelmsford - Wethersfield; 9/10 Braintree - Gt Bardfield. **County:** Essex. **District:** Braintree. **Population:** 1,269 in 2011.

Wethersfield is a parish of north Essex, next door to (and often overlooked because of) the well known parish of Finchingfield. Without doubt it does not have the immediate appeal of the latter; nevertheless it has much to commend a visit. It is thought to be named after a Viking –Wutha – who after crossing the North Sea would have landed at Mersea and made his way up the Rivers Blackwater and Pant, clearing an area of forest (feld or field) in which to settle.



The site of what is now the parish church of St Mary Magdalene is likely to have held a Saxon church originally. The oldest part of the church now standing is the tower, built in the 12th century, and part of the nave wall is thought to be Saxon. Additions were made in the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries. The church fell into disrepair during the 19th century and stood derelict for some considerable time, being extensively restored during the 1870s; the vestry and organ chamber were added at this time. Probably the most notable monuments in the church are the

recumbent alabaster effigies, thought to be of Henry Wentworth and his wife of Codham Hall in the south of the parish. The figures are badly disfigured by graffiti, some from the 17th century, but it is an interesting quirk of the modern brain that this somehow makes them more, rather than less interesting. No-one condones wanton damage to works of art, but it is curious to note that whilst modern graffiti have a tendency to outrage, historic graffiti are more often viewed as a fascinating commentary on the time in question and set the imagination wandering. An irrelevant but interesting question to ponder is how many centuries must pass before an act of thoughtless vandalism is transmuted into an intriguing statement of social history.

St Mary Magdalene is notable for two important figures of history. A memorial in the nave records the Clerke family, one of whose sons, Charles, was a Captain in the Royal Navy in the mid-1700s. Charles Clerke was a military man, explorer and adventurer who circumnavigated the globe three (almost four) times in his short life. Overshadowed in the annals of history by Captain James Cook, whom he served as second-in-command during the famous voyages in HMS Endeavour, Discovery and Resolution, Captain Clerke is sadly little known today. But a fitting tribute exists in the form of the book *In the Wake of Captain Cook: the life and times of Captain Charles Clerke, RN, 1741-1779* (see below).

Also overshadowed by more famous others, yet still worthy of historic note, is the Rev Patrick Bronte, father of Emily, Anne and Charlotte (and Branwell). Wethersfield was Patrick Bronte's first curacy from 1806 – 8 and he lived in St George's House opposite the church. He was in his early 30s at the time and during his incumbency pursued an unfruitful relationship with one 18-year-old Mary Burden. Few details are known about the demise of the relationship, but one is led to wonder how different our literary history might be if the union had taken place. At the beginning of 1809 Patrick left Wethersfield and had brief curacies in other churches before finally settling in Haworth, where so much is now known about his ensuing years.

Like many of its neighbouring parishes, Wethersfield once had numerous shops, hostelrys and even its own brewery (the Village Hall and Club have since taken up residence in the old malting chamber). Most were clustered around the triangular village green of Wethersfield village itself, now shaded by an imposing copse of tall plane trees. Only two shops and a small garage are left, but this area remains the focal point of the village. There are many buildings of great historic and architectural interest in the parish; well over 100 are listed, most at Grade II and a small number at Grade II*. A goodly number are distributed across



other areas of the parish, which is home to numerous small hamlets which are all 'Ends' or 'Greens'. The lovely Blackmore End is one of these and worth a visit, although The Bull, Wethersfield's last remaining pub, has now closed. The curiously named Rotten End is not as notable, although it is interesting to speculate why it would have been so called. There is certainly nothing rotten about it today.

The parish is thought to have connections with two or three 'Wethersfields' in the United States, possibly named by early emigrants to New England in the early 17th century, although this is difficult to verify. However a very recent and entirely reliable US link is the RAF Wethersfield air base at the northern edge of the parish which was opened towards the end of WWII. It closed in 1946, re-opening in 1952 when it was allocated to the United States Army Air Forces until 1970. Since 1993 it has been under the control of the Ministry of Defence Police.

The large parish of Wethersfield has many quiet, undulating, winding lanes, byways, bridleways and footpaths to attract the walker and the cyclist, or even the rider. If the children are with you, try not to miss Boydells Dairy Farm, but do check the website before you visit, for Boydells is a working farm and opening times sometimes change – www.boydellsdairy.co.uk. Lovers of dogs, cats and other small animals might also want to call in at RSPCA Danaher, in Hedingham Road - www.rspcaessex.org.uk.

If you plan to visit Wethersfield, do take a picnic with you, for a sad sign of the times is that there are no inns left in the village itself. Nevertheless, essentials can be obtained from the corner shop and there is a choice of good places to stay. The Green, Church Hill House and Brook Farm, all residences of ancient origin, offer bed and breakfast and get great reviews. Brook Farm, which was the birthplace of the aforementioned Charles Clerke, also offers camping in its grounds.

Hospitality:

Brook Farm B&B, CM7 4BX; 01371 850284

Church Hill House B&B, High Street, CM7 4BY; 01371 850342; www.churchhillhouse.co.uk

Upper Barns B&B, CM7 4EQ; 01371 850800; www.upperbarns.co.uk

Six Apples self-catering, CM7 4BX; 07505 241237; www.sixapples.co.uk/

Adjacent Hundred Parishes parishes: Shalford, Finchingfield.

Links:

Parish Council: www.wethersfield.org.uk

Village history: www.wethersfield-essex.co.uk

Further reading:

In the Wake of Captain Cook - the life and times of Captain Charles Clerke, RN, 1741-1779. G Cowley and L Deacon. Richard Kay Publishers.