About Ashwell
Ashwell is an attractive, characterful village in a landscape that is much more than simply a beautiful setting for the buildings: the fields, paths and byways record the ways in which people have lived and worked here for several thousand years.

**Prehistoric Ashwell**
By Roman times Ashwell Street and the Icknield Way to the south of the parish were important routes. There were other tracks and paths, but they and many archaeological features are now only visible in aerial photographs; the Bronze Age barrow (burial mound) that stands at Highley Hill is one of many in the south of the parish. Southwest of the village, Arbury Banks is an Iron Age hillfort that was also used in the early Roman period. The remains of houses, granaries and other features, as well as the lynches created by farming on the hillside indicate a thriving settlement here. Another Iron Age settlement lay between the village and Ashwell End.

**Roman Ashwell**
In the Roman period Ashwell parish was not only a prosperous agricultural landscape with villas set in well-tended fields but also a religious centre. A shrine to the goddess Semana stood at Ashwell End. Finds in Pricem’s Field suggest there was a villa there, and cropmarks show another villa to the west of Claybush Hill.

**Saxon Ashwell**
In the sixth and seventh centuries Ashwell was probably the centre of a large Anglo-Saxon estate. The modern village is largely the same as that planned and created early in the tenth century, probably for Edward the Elder. The Saxon village was centred on a marketplace in the area from Ashwell Springs to Gardiners Lane, bordered by High Street and Hodwell. The boundaries of individual properties, the burgage plots, set out at that time can still be traced today.

The earliest reference to Ashwell is in the will of Ethelelgin who died around 990. By 1086 Ashwell was a major settlement, one of only five boroughs (market towns with some rights to self-defence) in Hertfordshire.

**Medieval Ashwell**
Ashwell flourished as a market town in the late Anglo-Saxon and early medieval periods, but as competition with Baldock (founded c.1140) and other towns increased, Ashwell gradually fell behind. In 1300 it had over 100 properties, the building that now houses Ashwell Parish Council was the Post Office, and Pages Brewery was in回想 suggesting the variety of trades connected with farming; the Post Office directory for 1855 includes farmers, blacksmiths, wheelwrights, a harness maker, a butcher, a baker – and six brewers or beer retailers.

In 1863 the parish was enclosed: new farms were created on the four open fields (North Field, Quarry Field, Claybush Field, and Redlands Field) that for centuries had been farmed in common. Rural industries such as the making of straw plait for hats provided work, particularly for women. Most men worked on the land, or at trades connected with farming; the Post Office directory for 1855 includes farmers, blacksmiths, wheelwrights, a harness maker, a butcher, a baker – and six brewers or beer retailers.

**Post-medieval Ashwell**
From the sixteenth to the late nineteenth centuries Ashwell became a farming community. The marketplace filled with buildings and gardens, while the inns and beerhouses served local trade. Barley was a particularly important crop: malted and brewed with water from the chalk springs it produced excellent beer. In 1637 the people of Hinxworth complained that their taxes were too high with comparison with Ashwell ‘which has many rich manor houses and three times as much land and as good as Hinxworth’. At that time farms and inns would have brewed their own beer for workers and guests; commercial breweries such as Foodhams and Pages (whose malthouse is now the Village Hall) were built in the 19th century.

**Post-industrial Ashwell**
In the early twentieth century Ashwell and other parishes on the Gault Clay were not included in the 1965 Act; their older hedges were not included in the 1981 Act. In February 2000, the owners of the land adjacent to the A1 at Claybush Hill came to an agreement with the Countryside Management Service that the fields adjacent to the A1 would be managed as a conservation area.

**Post-war Ashwell**
After the Second World War, Ashwell started to recover and the post office, together with the newly formed village hall at Claybush End became the new centre of village life. In 1951 the parish had 1,300 residents. In the early 20th century Ashwell had a thriving agricultural community.

**Modern Ashwell**
In 2014 the population was 1,576. Ashwell Development Trust was set up to maintain and improve the village green and the greensand way to Cambridge and other paths through the village. The village shop and café are run by a voluntary committee. In 2015 the village community centre (previously the post office) was bought by the villagers.

**Village History and Wildlife**
Ashwell lies on sediments laid down during the Cretaceous period 100–65 million years ago and the Cenozoic era 65 million years ago. Ashwell village lies on a line of an impermeable layer, the Totternhoe Knolls, derived from the Chalk, with the ground water level very close to the surface. This makes the area suitable for wildlife. The geology and history of the parish influences the wildlife that may be seen here. The geology and flora of the parish are described in greater detail in the Ashwell Parish Council’s programme delivered by the Countryside Management Service and funded by Hertfordshire County Council.

The parish is a Site of Special Scientific Interest for women. Most men worked on the land, or at trades connected with farming; the Post Office directory for 1855 includes farmers, blacksmiths, wheelwrights, a harness maker, a butcher, a baker – and six brewers or beer retailers.

**History on the Rights of Way**
The history of the rights of way is one of the strengths of Ashwell and other parishes on the Gault Clay. The population of Ashwell and other parishes on the Gault increased as diggers and their families arrived. Local breweries benefited from increased trade, but by 1891 the rush was over. Pages Brewery closed in 1919 and the population high of 1,576 in 1871 was not reached again until 1981.

**Ashwell Today**
Most residents of Ashwell no longer work in agriculture, but farming continues to define the landscape of the parish. Fields of wheat, barley, sugar beet, peas and oil-seed rape change colour with the seasons. In summer dairy cattle graze the pastures of Bluedges Dairy, while ley grassland and maize produce silage to feed them through the winter. There is also a pig unit and a flock of rare breeds sheep in the parish.
Places of interest in Ashwell village
shown on the inset map

1. The Mill probably stands on the site of the watermill recorded in 1086; the mill ceased working in 1898. The name Mill Street is known from 1299.

2. Cemetery

3. Fordham Close was the site of Fordham’s Brewery.

4. St Mary’s Church dates from the 14th century, when it was built of clunch (hard chalk), possibly from the quarry (now a nature reserve) on the Hinxworth Road.

5. St Mary’s Church Room

6. Ashwell Springs, the source of the River Cam or Rhee.

7. Ashwell Museum, a collection that shows Ashwell village life from the Stone age to the present.

8. Zoar Baptist Chapel

9. United Reformed Church

10. The Village Hall

11. The Bushel and Strike public house

12. The Three Tuns public house

13. Rose and Crown public house

14. Recreation Ground and Children’s Playground

15. War Memorial

16. The village lock-up built c. 1800, stands in what is now the garden of 20 Hodwell.