

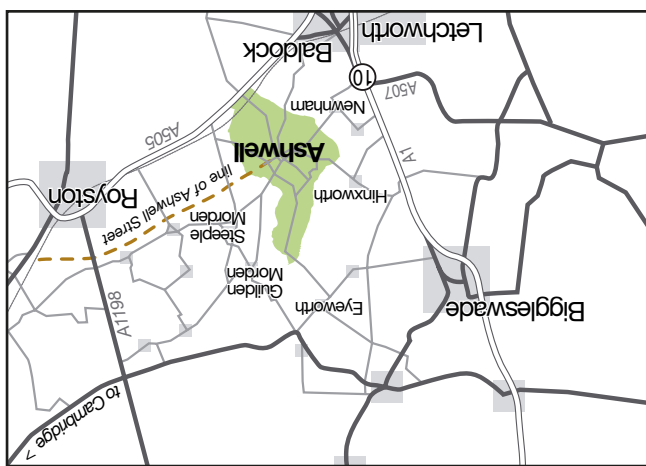
Ashwell

Explore our landscape and history on the rights of way

Sarah Wroot design 2010, reprinted 2016



This leaflet has been produced by Ashwell Parish Council working as part of the Parish Paths Partnership, a programme delivered by the Country Side Management Service and funded by Hertfordshire County Council.



The paths and byways of Ashwell offer many opportunities to relax while exploring the landscape and history of the parish. Books describing Ashwell walks are available from local retailers.

Remember that other people hope to enjoy the footpaths and wildlife. Please clean up after your dog, and do not allow dogs to defecate in grazed fields. In spring and early summer, please keep dogs under control to avoid disturbing birds nesting on or near the ground in fields and hedgerows. Please take your litter home!

If you have questions about the path network or wish to report a problem, please contact the Ashwell Parish Clerk: clerk@ashwell.gov.uk or via the website www.ashwell.gov.uk



Geology and Wildlife

Ashwell lies on sediments laid down during the Cretaceous period 100–65 million years ago. Earth movements and erosion have left the Middle Chalk in the south of the parish standing high above the softer Lower Chalk and Gault Clay in the north. **Claybush Hill**, the highest point in Ashwell, is covered with *hill*, a mix of clay and pebbles deposited by an ice sheet 500,000 years ago. Ashwell village lies on a *spring line*, where an impermeable layer, the *Tottenham Stone*, causes rainwater flowing through the chalk to emerge from the hillside.

The geology and history of the parish influences the wildlife that may be seen here. **Ashwell Springs** is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) protecting rare creatures living in the clean spring water. Wildflowers of neutral and chalk soils such as knapweeds and scabious bloom beside the roads and footpaths, attracting butterflies and other insects. Other features are part of the farming landscape. In 1863 the open fields were divided among different owners, who planted new hawthorn hedges around their fields. Most of the hedges in the parish date from this period. The small fields of **Ashwell End** were not included in the Act; their older hedges are richer in species, including Wild Pivet, Bullace Plum, Field Maple, Blackthorn and Guelder Rose. Birds such as Whitethroat, Chaffinch and Yellowhammers find food and shelter in the hedges, while Sparrowhawks, Kestrels and all three species of owls watch for small mammals in the grasses. In spring Skylarks sing in the sky above the fields.

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 **lynchets** 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 Senuna 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 *burgess plots*, set out at that time can still be traced today.

The earliest reference to Ashwell is in the will of Aethelgifu 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 the 1300s the parish was still attracting people from as far afield as France, and was able to build the parish church of **St Mary**, with the largest tower in Hertfordshire. Other late medieval buildings include the building that now houses **Ashwell Museum** and the Guildhouse of the Brotherhood of St John the Baptist, both of which faced the marketplace. Kirby Manor Farmhouse, Bear House and Dixies Farm were the homes of prosperous farmers.

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 by comparison with Ashwell 'which has many rich maltsters 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 **Fordhams** and Pages (whose malthouse is now the **Village Hall**) were built in the 19th century.

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.



Small-scale brewing in 1808

Brief prosperity in the mid- to late-nineteenth century was based on coprolites, phosphate-rich nodules found in 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.

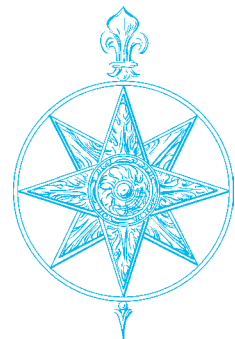
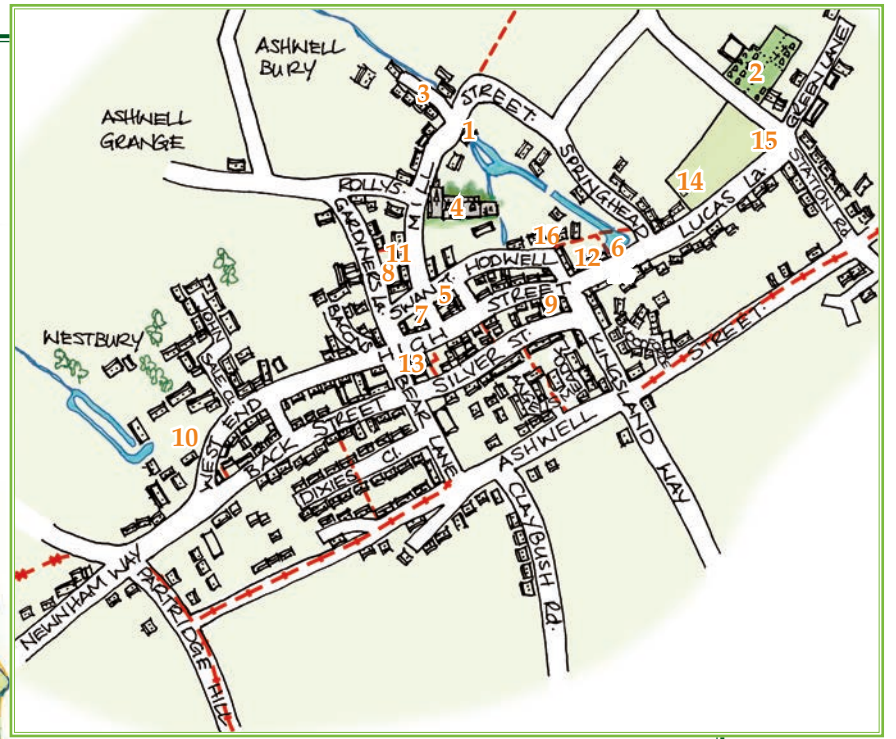
Ashwell Today

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 **Bluegates 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 *church* (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.



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| | Public footpath | | | Parish boundary |
| | Public bridleway | | | County boundary |
| | Public byway | | | Public house |
| | Public byway (restricted) | | | Iron Age settlement |
| | Permissive path (permissive routes may be closed at any time) | | | Roman site |
| | | | | Medieval moated site |
| | | | | 19th century windmill |

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