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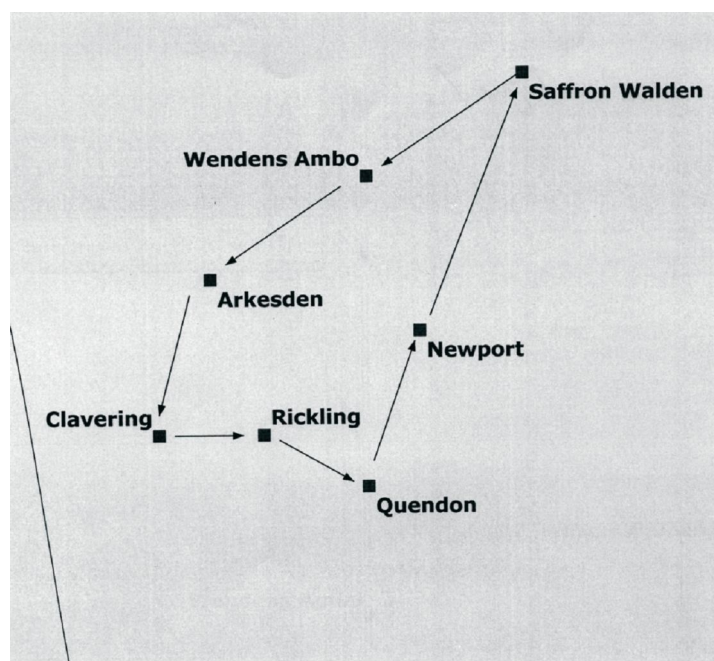
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Churches of North-west Essex

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Route of NW Essex church tour, 18 miles.

In 1973 the National Association of Decorative & Fine Art Societies (NADFAS)* set up an ambitious project to record all the features of churches, including names of artists, manufacturers, donors and those commemorated.

In each case NADFAS compiles a substantial and very fine album of photographs and detailed information which can be kept by the church for future reference. So far 1,200 churches have been recorded and in N.W. Essex the Saffron Walden group have surveyed Wendens Ambo, Arkesden, Clavering, Rickling, Quendon, Newport, Wicken Bonhunt, Littlebury, Debden, Hadstock, Strethall, Ashdon, Radwinter, Chrishall, Great Chesterford, Heydon, Thaxted and Hempstead. Some of the

interesting features from the first six on this list are described in this circular 18-mile tour to and from Saffron Walden, with time for a quick pub lunch en route at any of the villages.

Wendens Ambo Parish Church



Wendens Ambo Church, dedicated to St Mary the Virgin, is tiny. The west door is arched with Roman tiles, one of some 300 churches in Essex where people used Roman remains within the construction or possibly reconstruction from local Roman villas. Inside there are 14th century wall paintings and a 14th century brass of a knight in full armour. On the front bench on the south side is a carved animal, possibly a bear with its paw on a mirror, thrown down by the person it was pursuing, enabling the victim to make an escape. In the churchyard by the south door is a large table to William Nicholson, who died aged 104. He had been a Midshipman under Nelson on HMS *Vanguard* on which Lady Hamilton and her husband took refuge when the French captured Naples at the end of the 18th century.

Arkesden Parish Church

Withers memorial in Arkesden Church

Arkesden Church, dedicated to St Mary, you cannot miss as your drive through the village. Much worked on by the Victorians, but they did not touch two exceptional memorials, one dated 1592, the other 1692. The early one, a huge six-poster with the figures of Richard Cutte and his wife, is in the south aisle and is the only one of its kind in the area. Figures of their six children feature in the recesses beneath and around. The busts of John Withers and his wife are in the tower (figure 2). It is thought they were modelled to go in a larger place, possibly a cathedral. How lucky they remained in Arkesden for everyone to comment how like Charles II, John Withers was.



In the restoration of the 19th century, a certain lady financed the work in the chancel. When it was finished she thought she had the right to sit

there with her friends. The Vicar thought otherwise. In a fit of pique she took the keys of the family vault which is under the chancel and threw them in through the window grill, making sure that she would not join her ancestors there and making sure no one else would either!

Clavering Parish Church

Clavering Church, dedicated to St Mary & St Clement, is located in the oldest part of the village. The church, which celebrated its 600th anniversary about 20 years ago, has three things which pre-date the present building, one of them the font. Another is an effigy of a Crusader knight c.1250, which lies in a sepulchre in the north aisle in the Australian Chapel. This chapel has an altar, a wooden cross and candlesticks and six blue kneelers given by the Royal Australian Air Force, and their relatives.

The third is the ledger stone in the centre of the nave, which is dated pre-1330: we know this because the Lombardic script, used to describe who it is, was not in use after this date. The inscription begins in the top middle and reads clockwise. It is in Norman French: 'ICI: GEYT MESTRE: (?A)BLADE' ('here lies Master Ablade'). The rest is difficult to read and should be a prayer, generally meaning 'God have mercy on his soul'. We really only know the name of the person commemorated – Master Ablade, the designation 'master' indicating that he was a clerk and a graduate of one of the universities. The stone is Purbeck marble, a form of polishable limestone from Corfe, Dorset, frequently used for floor slabs and paving in the Middle Ages. The indents show that the slab was once inlaid with brass Lombardic letters characteristic of the main group of lettering, which were used on brasses between 1270 and 1350.

The screen is contemporary with the building of the church and is a shadow of its former self. Its medieval bright paint was, over the years, covered with three layers of dull paint. This was removed in the 1930s by Miss May Ffytche who wrote: 'I began chipping the modern paint off this screen in September 1930 and finished doing so in September 1933, having worked at it two hours a day for 86 weeks. The tools I used were a heavy garden knife of mother's, over 20 years old, a lighter knife, a chisel and a scalpel.' She was looking for the medieval paint and found 'gold leaf on the west side of the upper tracery... a beautiful blue.. otherwise vermilion, green and pink.' The traces are small, you have to look carefully. But she also revealed figures 'most unusual, being only in black and white. The first is St Anthony, with his pig, the second St Leger.. the third St Lawrence and his grid iron.' The others she described, but now some 70 years later, cannot be made out at all.

For lovers of stained glass windows, there is medieval glass in the east window of the Australian Chapel, and in the tracery of several windows in the north aisle. The roof of the south aisle has feathered angels which are mirrored in the tracery of the window at the east end of the aisle.

Rickling Parish Church

Rickling Church, dedicated to All Saints, stands some distance from the larger village of Rickling Green, within what is now a tiny hamlet of some ten houses. It was closed during World War Two and the contents stored. At the end of hostilities the diocese thought it was not necessary to re-open it. However the owner of Rickling Hall, where the contents had been stored, was able to prevail upon the Bishop and the church was opened up. How right he was! There are thousands of daffodils planted between the church and the road – these are certainly worth a detour in March/April, around Easter time.

Quendon Parish Church

In Quendon, you can drive along the old A11 and wonder where the church is: look for the sign on a lamp post not far from the horse trough, and go up a lane to where the church perches on a small rise. It has a single pitched roof and bell tower that looks as though it came from New England.



Into the village in the 1930s came Stephen Dykes Bower, who became churchwarden, and was organist for over 50 years. He was to be one of the foremost church architects of the 20th century. His first major commission was to build All Saints', Hockerill, Bishop's Stortford, completed in 1937. He worked on about a third of the country's cathedrals, including St Paul's where he added the baldachino and the American Memorial chapel. He was surveyor of the fabric of Westminster Abbey 1951-73, where he restored the interior adding most of the painting and gilding which does so much to give it its regal character, and worked on 150 other parish churches as well as colleges and schools, including the completion of Lancing College Chapel, Sussex with its 32-foot diameter rose window. In the 1960s he restored Quendon church, rebuilt the roof and redecorated the interior, notably the painted and gilded chancel roof, and designed the elaborate reredos). The chancel walls were panelled and the screen heightened and extended.

One of the benefactors at this time was an American lady, Elizabeth Beaman (nee Gibbon). She and her husband George came to live in Quendon. To commemorate her generosity, there are two gibbons (figure 5) on the arch of the screen and several bees in the spandrels of the

chancel panelling. When the belfry was renewed new bells were cast and they are called Elizabeth and George. When Stephen Dykes Bower died a few years ago, he left sufficient money for the completion of the great tower of Bury St Edmunds Cathedral, which is due to be consecrated in 2006.

Newport Parish Church

Newport Church, also dedicated to St Mary the Virgin, with its great tower can be seen for several miles. Its great treasure is the travelling altar chest. Dating from the 13th century, it has some of the earliest known painting on wood on the underside of the lid, which lifts to form the reredos. Two figures stand on either side of the cross (figures 6 & 7), they have distinct faces, possibly portraits of the artist's friends, and their stance is as if they sway, which is so typical of this date. It is also seen in brasses in Chrishall, Wimbish and Saffron Walden churches. In an exhibition in London some years ago, 'The Age of Chivalry', the altar chest was placed in a glass case on an island site, and much admired by historians. Again there are some fine windows: two medieval lancets in the north transept, depicting St Catherine and St George, are thought to have come from an abbey at the Restoration.

***Further information:** www.nadfas.org.uk