



Grantchester

A village history from Domesday to the Old Vicarage

Sample edition, made to show what an Oak & Almanac place history looks like

About this book

This short history of Grantchester, a village beside the River Cam about two miles south-west of Cambridge, shows how we make a place history. Every fact here comes from published, checkable sources. They are listed on the Sources page, and the small numbers in the text point to them. Where the sources disagree or are unsure, we say so in a shaded note like this one:

Uncertain: notes like this mark points where the evidence is incomplete or conflicting. We would rather tell you we don't know than guess.

The book deals only with the past. It names people who are long dead and who appear in published histories. It does not describe or identify anyone living today, including current owners or residents of the houses shown.

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The place and its name

Grantchester's name does not come from a Roman *chester*, as antiquaries once liked to think. The Victoria County History (VCH) traces it to the *Grantasetan*, "settlers beside the Granta", the old name of the Cam.¹ There was probably a small Roman settlement near the village. The parish also lies close to the line of the Roman road known as Akeman Street. Claims that earthworks by the river were a Roman "camp or city" are older speculation.¹

The village probably first grew along a wide east–west street, once its green and later called Coton Road. From there the village street zigzags south-east towards the church and the manor house.¹ When the parish boundaries were fixed under the Inclosure Act of 1799, finalised in 1803, the parish covered 1,557 acres. In 1912 the part that had become a suburb of Cambridge, Newnham Croft, was transferred to the borough, leaving 1,391 acres.¹

How many people?

YEAR	RECORD	FIGURE
1086	Domesday inhabitants (incl. Coton)	c. 76
1377	Adults paying the poll tax (incl. Coton)	177
1563	Families	16
1666	Dwellings recorded	37
1728	People / families	170 / 38
1801	Parish population	294
1851	Village (excl. Newnham Croft)	517
1871	Village	c. 625
1931	Village	546
1961	Village	418

All figures from the VCH.¹ Early counts covered heads of household or taxpayers, not everyone, and before 1400 they include Coton. The VCH gives several mid-19th-century village figures as "probably", so treat them as estimates.

The village on the 1886 map



Ordnance Survey six-inch map, Cambridgeshire sheet XLVII.SW, surveyed 1885, published 1886 (detail). Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland.³

Things to spot: Corn Mills on the mill-stream, which burnt down in 1928.¹ Byron's Pool, named by 1851.¹ Manor Farm just south of the church. Riversdale, built by S. P. Widnall in the 1850s.¹ The School and the Vicarage by the green.

A map puzzle solved: the map marks "Ball's Grove" in 1886, yet the VCH dates the house called Balls Grove to about 1906. Both are right. The house was named after the lords of the manor's wood that once stood on its site, and the 1886 label is that wood.^{1,3}

Lords, manors and colleges

In 1086 Grantchester was divided among several lords, including Robert Fafiton and knights of Count Eustace of Boulogne.¹ Over the next four centuries these holdings formed a patchwork of manors. One, later called **Burwash**, passed through the Quincy, Lacy, Despenser and Burghersh families. Another, **Jaks**, took its name from Jakes Grantchester, of a family who took their surname from the village itself.¹

The most dramatic moment belongs to **Jakes Grantchester**. In the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 he was compelled, the VCH says, to become captain of the insurgent burgesses of Cambridge. He survived and died in 1404.¹

In the early 15th century **Henry Somer**, Chancellor of the Exchequer, brought Burwash and Jaks together. He also leased Merton College's estate, which Merton had bought in 1273 and still owned in 1970.¹ After Somer's death in 1450 his executors sold his Grantchester lands to **King's College, Cambridge**, in 1452. After King's bought the Page family's land in 1866, it owned virtually the whole parish, apart from the Corpus Christi and Merton estates, the vicar's glebe and a few small crofts.¹



Manor Farmhouse. The VCH describes a timber-framed medieval manor house with a hall, solar and two cross-wings, standing by a moated site; it belonged to Henry Somer.¹ Listed Grade II.² Photo: Verbcatcher, CC BY-SA 4.0.*

Eels, malt and the mill

Domesday Book records Robert Fafiton's mill, worth £2, with a weir that rendered 1,000 eels a year, half in Grantchester and half in Trumpington.¹ That mill has probably disappeared, and the VCH warns against confusing it with the mill above Byron's Pool mentioned by Chaucer.¹ The mill that survived was a different one: in 1086 it was held of Count Eustace, and William Appleford later sold it to Merton College, which owned it into modern times. Until about 1480 it fulled cloth as well as grinding corn. In 1553 the miller, Maurice Neville, was accused of flooding the village meadows. The mill kept working through the 19th and early 20th centuries and burnt down in 1928.¹

Henry Somer's estate accounts from the 1430s and 1440s give a sharp picture of a medieval farm business. Wheat went to Cambridge bakers. Barley was malted and sold to London brewers: 400 quarters in 1445 and again in 1446. The dovecot produced pigeons by the score, 130 dozen in 1436. Swans were kept on the river, and saffron and cherries were grown in the garden.¹



"Grantchester Mill", photographed 11 June 1966. Photo: David Purchase, CC BY-SA 2.0 (geograph.org.uk).

Uncertain: because the working mill burnt in 1928,¹ this 1966 photograph must show buildings that survived or were built at the mill site afterwards. We have not confirmed which.

The church of St Andrew and St Mary

Parts of the nave go back to the late 11th or early 12th century. The chancel was rebuilt in the 14th century to an elaborate design.¹ About 1400 the west tower was added. The arms of John Fordham, bishop of Ely from 1388 to 1426, are carved by its west doorway.¹

The church was enlarged in 1877–8 with a south aisle designed by Arthur Blomefield, and the tower was restored, largely in concrete, in 1899–1900.¹ Three bells hung there in 1968, one dated 1610 and one 1677. The registers begin in 1539.¹



The east window, from the Cambridge Camden Society's illustrations (1846). Public domain.

The famous clock

The church clock is known far beyond Cambridgeshire because of Rupert Brooke's poem (see page 9). It was installed in 1870 or 1877 and was out of order for many years after 1907.¹

Uncertain: the VCH says the evidence about the hour at which the stopped hands stood "is conflicting".¹ Brooke's "ten to three" may be poetry rather than record.

The church is listed Grade II* (list entry 1309436).²

The Old Vicarage and its owners

The house now called the Old Vicarage was built in 1683 by the vicar, Matthew Shortyng, on the site of an older vicarage recorded in 1639.¹ Vicars, or more often their curates, lived there until about 1851, when William Martin (vicar 1850–82) built a new vicarage north-west of the church.¹ One earlier vicar had a royal connection: John Hooke, vicar from 1762 to 1777, was tutor to George III's children at Kew and left the parish to a curate.¹

In 1853 the house was bought by **Samuel Page Widnall**, a nurseryman's son who "dabbled in lecturing and inventing". He filled the garden with follies and ran his own printing press. He also wrote a history of Grantchester, published in 1878.¹ Only one folly survived in 1970: a garden house with Gothic ornaments, restored after 1918. It is now listed in its own right.^{1,2}



The Old Vicarage in 2012. Listed Grade II (list entry 1127790).² Photo: Howard Somerville, CC BY 2.0.

Our privacy rule in action: this history stops with people who are long dead. We do not discuss the house's present-day owners.

Rupert Brooke and the Orchard

By 1900 Grantchester was a favourite destination for undergraduates punting and walking along the river.¹ The poet Rupert Brooke (1887–1915) lodged there between 1909 and 1911. He stayed first at **the Orchard**, where there was a tea-shop, and later at the Old Vicarage.¹ The Orchard had opened as a tea garden in 1897.⁴

Homesick in Berlin in 1912, Brooke wrote the poem first called "The Sentimental Exile" and later published as "The Old Vicarage, Grantchester".⁵ It ends with the lines that made the village famous:

*Stands the Church clock at ten to three?
And is there honey still for tea?*⁶



The Orchard tea garden, May 2007. Public domain (uploaded to Wikipedia by KF).

The Victorian village at work

Fields. Grantchester stayed largely agricultural through the 19th century. It had 75 farm labourers in 1841 and 48 in 1851. In 1861 the farms employed 54 men and 21 boys.¹

Coprolites. In 1861, 26 men were digging coprolites, fossil phosphate nodules dug from the gault clay and sold as fertiliser. The digging lasted from about 1860 to the early 1880s. King's College, as lord of the manor, took royalties of up to £100 an acre. S. P. Widnall complained in 1864 that the digging had pushed up his labourers' wages by a shilling a week.¹

Dahlias. From the 1830s Samuel Widnall and his son S. P. Widnall ran nursery gardens from the Grange, supplying their florist's shop in Cambridge. They were noted for their dahlias.¹

Beer and bricks. By 1851 the Heffer family owned a small brewery behind the Blue Ball inn, which worked until about 1900. A brickworks between the Barton and Grantchester roads existed by 1830 and employed about six men in the 1850s.¹

Pubs. In 1851 the village had four public houses: the Red Lion, Green Man, Blue Bell and Rose and Crown. All four were still open in 1970.¹

Dons. From the 1870s Cambridge academics settled here. The VCH names the philosopher A. N. Whitehead, the geneticist William Bateson (who experimented on plants in his Grantchester garden), the ecologist Sir Arthur Tansley and the zoologist Cecil Warburton (1854–1959).¹

Uncertain: the VCH calls the brewery's inn the "Blue Ball" but lists the 1851 pub as the "Blue Bell".¹ These may be the same house, or one may be a misprint. A trade directory would settle it.

Customs, chapels and the parish

Through the year. In the 19th century the village boys went round singing and asking for money on Plough Monday, and went "mumping" with blackened faces at Christmas. Traditional May-day ceremonies lasted until 1914. By 1850 the labourers had happily swapped the old "horkeys", or harvest suppers, for cash.¹

The porch tradition. By village custom, a family left homeless could lodge in the church porch, and the parish was then bound to find it a home. After the custom was successfully tested about 1830, the church door was moved to the outside of the porch.¹

Chapel and revival. John Wesley visited in 1759 and 1762. It was John Berridge, preaching in a barn, who did most to bring nonconformity to the village. In 1759 he preached here to a congregation of about 1,000.¹ A Baptist chapel was built on the Cambridge road in 1876 and enlarged in 1891.¹

School. After a first schoolroom proved too small, King's College gave a site across the main street. A new school opened there in 1867. In 1871 it had 35 boys and 39 girls.¹

The "firebrands of the Croft". The parish council, set up in 1894, let allotments from 1898. As Newnham Croft grew, its residents demanded paved roads, drains and street lights; gas lighting came in 1907. When the Croft joined Cambridge in 1912, the VCH says the "firebrands of the Croft" and the villagers "parted with mutual relief".¹



The church on Christmas morning, 2016. Photo: John Sutton, CC BY-SA 2.0 (geograph.org.uk).

Houses to look for



Audley Cottage on the Cambridge road. Its oriel window, carved barge-boards and kings' heads in the gables "may owe those decorations only to 19th-century alterations" (VCH).¹ Grade II.² Photo: Erban Doyle White, CC BY-SA 4.0; vehicles blurred by us.

BUILDING	WHAT THE RECORD SAYS	LIST ENTRY ²
Church of St Andrew and St Mary	Nave partly late 11th/early 12th c.; tower c. 1400 ¹	II* · 1309436
Manor Farmhouse	Timber-framed medieval manor house ¹	II* · 1309385
Old Vicarage	Built 1683 by Matthew Shortyng ¹	II · 1127790
Garden building, Old Vicarage	Widnall's surviving Gothic folly ¹	II · 1127791
Wright's Row	Timber-framed thatched cottages, "frequently photographed" ¹	II · 1162814
Audley Cottage	Oriel and carved decoration ¹	II · 1127784
Mill House	Listed house; its history is not covered by the VCH	II · 1309403

Check before you rely on it: we took list entry numbers and grades from a public mirror of the National Heritage List for England.² In a customer's book we confirm each one against Historic England's own entry.

A Grantchester timeline

1086	Domesday: about 76 inhabitants; Fafiton's mill renders 1,000 eels
c. 1100	Earliest surviving parts of the church nave
1273	Merton College, Oxford buys its Grantchester estate
1381	Jakes Grantchester made captain of the Cambridge insurgents
c. 1400	West tower built, with Bishop Fordham's arms
1445	400 quarters of Somer's malt sold to London brewers
1452	King's College buys Somer's lands
1539	Surviving parish registers begin
1683	Matthew Shortyng builds the house now called the Old Vicarage
1759	John Berridge preaches to about 1,000; John Wesley visits
1762–77	John Hooke, vicar and tutor to George III's children
1803	Inclosure award; parish fixed at 1,557 acres
c. 1830	Porch custom tested; the church door is moved
1853	S. P. Widnall buys the Old Vicarage
c. 1860–80s	Coprolite digging
1867	New village school opens
1870/77	Church clock installed (the date is uncertain)
1886	Ordnance Survey six-inch map published
1897	The Orchard opens as a tea garden ⁴
1909–11	Rupert Brooke lodges at the Orchard, then the Old Vicarage
1912	Newnham Croft joins Cambridge; Brooke writes his poem in Berlin ⁵
1914	Last of the traditional May-day ceremonies
1928	The mill burns down

Source 1 unless marked otherwise.

Where every fact comes from

1. A. P. M. Wright et al., "Grantchester", in *A History of the County of Cambridge and the Isle of Ely*, vol. 5, ed. C. R. Elrington (London: Victoria County History, 1973), pp. 198–214. British History Online: <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/cambs/vol5/pp198-214>. The VCH's own footnotes cite the underlying archives (King's College muniments, Ely diocesan records, census returns and so on). A full commission would follow up the most important of these.

2. Historic England, National Heritage List for England: list entries 1309436, 1309385, 1127790, 1127791, 1162814, 1127784, 1309403, consulted via the British Listed Buildings mirror, <https://britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/england/grantchester-south-cambridgeshire-cambridgeshire>. To be verified at <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/>.

3. Ordnance Survey, six-inch to the mile, Cambridgeshire sheet XLVII.SW (surveyed 1885, published 1886) and XLVII.NW (surveyed 1886, published 1888). National Library of Scotland, <https://maps.nls.uk/view/101572057> and /101572030.

4. "The Orchard (tea room)", Wikipedia, consulted 23 October 2026 (opening date 1897). This is a secondary source, flagged for checking against the Orchard's own published history.

5. "The Old Vicarage, Grantchester", Wikipedia, consulted 23 October 2026 (written in Berlin in 1912; first titled "The Sentimental Exile"). Secondary source.

6. Rupert Brooke, "The Old Vicarage, Grantchester", in *The Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke: With a Memoir* (1918). Brooke died in 1915, so the text is out of copyright in the UK.

Notes on wording. The text is our own summary of these sources. Short phrases in quotation marks are quoted from the VCH (source 1) for accuracy and are attributed in the text. Historic England list descriptions are not reproduced; only entry numbers and grades are given.

How this book was made

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p.5: Manor Farmhouse, Verbcatcher, 2016, CC BY-SA 4.0.

p.6: Grantchester Mill, David Purchase, 1966, CC BY-SA 2.0 via [geograph.org.uk](https://www.geograph.org.uk).

p.7: East window, Cambridge Camden Society, 1846, public domain.

p.8: Old Vicarage, Howard Somerville, 2012, CC BY 2.0.

p.9: The Orchard, KF, 2007, public domain.

p.11: Church on Christmas morning, John Sutton, 2016, CC BY-SA 2.0.

p.12: Audley Cottage, Ethan Doyle White, 2022, CC BY-SA 4.0 (cropped, vehicles blurred).

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Method. This book was compiled from published sources: the Victoria County History, historic Ordnance Survey maps, heritage list entries and openly licensed photographs. Every statement was then checked against the source it cites. Anything that could not be supported was cut, and the uncertainty notes were added. Nothing in this book is invented, but published histories can still be wrong (see Accuracy below).

What a full commission adds. More maps (the tithe and inclosure maps, and later OS editions), census and trade-directory entries for the house's past occupants (people recorded before 1921 only), newspaper finds, and a chapter on the customer's own house.

Privacy. We write only about the past. We do not research, name or describe living private individuals. Customer details are used only to make and deliver the order.

Accuracy. Published histories can contain errors. Where our sources conflict we say so. If you spot a mistake, tell us and we will correct the digital edition free of charge.

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We find it, source it and bind it.

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