

UTTLESFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL  
DEBDEN

DEBDEN HALL [now FARM]

TL 552 336

Very fine, late 18<sup>th</sup> century landscape garden now degraded and in divided ownership.

### HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Debden has long been considered one of the finest parts of the county: Collier writing his *People's History of Essex* in 1861 tells us that 'Debden.... is a delightful spot when woodlands which crown its fine hills are green in summer clothing, and its vallies below are covered with waving crops. It seems to have been from the earliest ages a favorite and fertile spot.' At the time of the Domesday survey, when it belonged to Ralph Peverell, it was recorded that there existed four acres of vineyard, two of which were producing; proving, as Collier states: 'the wine which cheered our forefathers was manufactured in their own homesteads.'

Ralph Peverell was succeeded by his son, and then his grandson, who having poisoned the Earl of Chester was forced to flee the country. He was dispossessed of the estate, which was subsequently seized by Henry II, who passed it to his son, the Earl of Mortain, later King John. He granted the manor to Geoffrey FitzPiers, Earl of Essex, whose daughter carried it in marriage to Henry de Bohun, High Constable of Essex and Earl of Hereford, Essex and Northampton. The estate descended: son, grandson and great-grandson until 1372 when it was divided between two daughters, one of whom was married to the future Henry IV. Their heirs, who included Henry V, agreed to a partition of the estate. The king received the manor hall, which became vested in the Crown.

Henry VIII granted it to Lord Audley, by whose daughter the manor descended to her son, Thomas Howard, Baron Howard de Walden and Earl of Suffolk. It remained in the family until 1660 when it was then sold to Thomas Grove and soon afterwards to Sir Richard Browne. Muilman (*A New and Complete History of Essex*) tells us 'This gentleman built the brick bridge of five arches, before the house, and the elegant stable belonging to the house.' He and his son died in 1685 within three days of each other, but the manor had already been sold to John Edwards. It was his son, Henry Edwards, who sold the estate to Richard Chiswell in 1715 and began the story of expansion and improvement of Debden manor under the Chiswell family.

Richard Chiswell was a London merchant, widely travelled, a Whig M.P. for Calne in Wiltshire and a director of the Bank of England; his father was an eminent stationer and bookseller, also named Richard. The Richard Chiswell of Debden Hall married Mary Trench. Five of their children died in infancy and two of their sons died in Constantinople at the age of eighteen. Their surviving son, Richard, inherited the estate in 1751, dying unmarried in 1772. Muilman writing in 1770 says of it: 'between [the village] and the house is a small grove of stately trees: in front is a fine piece of water,

and a delightful view of the country; on the other sides are a variety of prospects, plantations, gardens, etc. that conspire to add to the beauty of its situation: a little way from the house, at a declivity of the hill in the road which leads to Widdington, etc. the present owner of the hall hath, at his own private expence, erected a substantial bridge, for which he must be acknowledged a public benefactor... It is now in Richard Chiswell...who has greatly improved it.'

Richard Chiswell left his considerable fortune and estate to his sister's son, Richard Muilman, who added the family names of his mother and grandmother to his own, becoming Richard Muilman Trench Chiswell. Changes began under his ownership, as a highway diversion of January 1773 shows regarding the enclosure of a public highway across Debden Hall yard and the commitment to 'sort out and make his own soil another Highway...' This must have involved creating a new bridge as a copy inquisition dated 1772 states 'Richard Muilman Trench Chiswell do erect and maintain at his own charge a good and substantial bridge.'

On the Chapman & Andre county map of 1777 where the Debden estate bears the inscription 'Trench Chiswell, Esq.' (as he was generally referred to), we see the improvements that had taken place. An impressive sweep of water begins from the damming of a stream, passes under a bridge and widens out to a considerable area as it flows past the house. J.A. Rush (*Seats in Essex*, 1897) tells us 'The house is surrounded by delightful grounds, which slope to an artificial lake of considerable size, made by excavating and damming the small stream called the Black Brook, which runs through the extensive and well wooded park.' The map shows parkland and plantations on the perimeters of the estate.

By c.1790 a series of watercolours show the house and aspects of the park. In two of the images: 'Debden Hall' and 'The Greenhouses, Debden Hall', a figure views the scene with sketchpad in hand and is accompanied by a pointing companion. Could they be Henry Holland, the architect, and Trench Chiswell discussing the rebuilding of the hall? Collier writing in 1861 (*People's History of Essex*) tells us: 'The south-eastern front is in Grecian Style, with noble pillars.' There are no 'noble pillars' in the watercolour of c.1790, but Collier goes on to tell us that 'The mansion was built from designs of Holland, in 1791 by Richard Chiswell, Esq...' Certainly the portico can be seen in many later prints of Debden Hall and one engraved by T. Matthews, although undated, shows figures dressed in costume of the very early C19.

The Debden estate certainly prospered and grew under the Chiswell family, their care even extending to renovations to the church, but it came to a sad end in 1797 when Trench Chiswell lost a fortune in connection with the West Indies and committed suicide, leaving the estate to his daughter Mary, widow of Sir Francis Vincent, 8<sup>th</sup> Baronet. After an uneventful C19 the estate fell on hard times between the wars, and the mansion was demolished in 1936. The land is now in the ownership of three farms and the C18 features still remain, although overgrown and the once 'fine piece of water' can still be picked out on the 2000 county aerial survey.

## **SITE DESCRIPTION**

### **LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING**

Debden Hall stood 0.3kms NW of Debden parish church, towards the bottom of a S facing hillside into which it was partly cut, with views to S and W over the long curved lake. The site is surrounded on three sides (N, W and S) by a valley (flooded to form a lake) with undulating countryside beyond. The distant view is closed by woodland belts on the higher ground beyond. The estate covered about 53 hectares and is now divided between three farms.

### **ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES**

The main approach was from Newport lodge on the N edge of the park. This is a single storey polygonal building in gault brick with gothic windows, now much enlarged. The first section of drive runs through a woodland belt, flanked by some surviving yew trees which show no evidence of having been cut as a hedge. After crossing a utilitarian brick culvert, it climbs the hill between a line of lime trees, with open parkland on each side. The mansion would not have been visible until after reaching the crown of the hill. At the bottom of the hill, the drive bifurcates. One section, now overgrown, turned W to the front of the house, the other continues past the stables, crossing the lake over a C19 three arch bridge (recently covered with a concrete slab). It continues up the slope on the other side through former parkland and woodland to join a track between Waldegraves Farm and Rook End.

### **PRINCIPAL BUILDINGS**

The mansion (dating from at least two different periods) was demolished in 1936 after a period of decline, and only its cellars remain visible. A small cube shaped building in gault brick with a hipped plain tile roof (said to have been a game larder), and an intact icehouse, survive just N of the footprint of the mansion. To the SE is an unusual and very substantial, two storey, red brick stable block in Flemish bond, probably early C18, but worthy of further investigation. It is roofed with concrete pantiles. The symmetrical façade of the bailiff's house (dated 1783 in the external plaster), the yard and the buildings of Hall Farm are on higher ground 0.3kms NE of the mansion site. These are of red brick and plastered timber frame, and the fine red brick double height courtyard gateway arch is dated 1782.

### **REFERENCES**

- Muilman, P., 1770 *A New and Complete History of Essex*, ii, 1770  
Wright, T., 1836 *History and Topography of Essex*  
Coller, D W., 1861 *The People's History of Essex*  
Rush, J A., 1897 *Seats in Essex*  
Norwak, J M., 1991 *The Parish of Debden and the Church of St. Mary and All Saints*

### **Maps**

- Chapman and André, *Map of Essex*, 1777  
OS 6" to 1 mile: 1<sup>st</sup> edition published 1876

OS 25" to 1 mile: 2<sup>nd</sup> edition revised survey 1896

Tithe map, 1843: ERO D/CT 112B

Estate survey 1777 by Thomas Nicholson: ERO D/DQy 6

Map of Debden and Widdington c1840, (no title or surveyor): ERO D/DQy/22

### **Archival Items**

Copy Inquisition 1772: ERO D/DA6 03

Highway Diversion 1773: ERO Q/RHi 2

Miscellaneous documents 'Debden Hall Essex from 1786 to 1882: ERO T/B 172/1

### **Images**

Copy of watercolours contained in Miscellaneous documents 'Debden Hall Essex 1786 to 1882':  
ERO T/B 172/1

Engravings of Debden Hall, Essex: ERO I/Mb 115/1/3 and 1/4

County Aerial Survey 1990 Run 34 1726

Researcher: Gloria Hammond. Site visit John & Gloria Hammond, Michael Leach 19 December 2003