

**MALDON DISTRICT COUNCIL  
WICKHAM BISHOPS**

**GREAT RUFFINS**

**TL 853 127**

An early 20C garden laid out by Arthur Heygate Mackmurdo, one of the foremost designers of furniture, textiles and metalwork in the 1880s, also an architect and a social reformer.

### **HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT**

A.H. Mackmurdo (1851-1942) acquired '60 acres of heather land, chiefly colonised by rabbits' on Beacon Hill soon after his marriage in 1902. His first step was to build himself a 'commodious bungalow' from which to supervise the laying out of the grounds. This was completed before he started the construction of a house for himself in a dominant position at the top of the site. To the south, he laid out 'shapely terraces, round ponds, square yew-walled gardens', each slightly lower than the one above in order to protect the view from the mansion. Beyond the formal gardens, there was open countryside with, on fine days, an uninterrupted view of the River Thames. A contemporary description noted a 'picturesque rock garden, spanned by an artistic bridge leading to the Pergola garden'. It also stated that the soil was mainly sand and gravel, and that much effort had been put into improving it. The many prizes that Mackmurdo won at Essex Horticultural Shows showed how effective this had been. Though the site was extremely dry, it benefited from an abundance of water a few feet below the surface, supplemented by an elaborate rainwater storage system, collected from run-off from the house and terrace. Underground tanks supplied the numerous water taps scattered throughout the garden.

The garden had a strongly axial quality, with a path leading down the central flight of steps on the top terrace, to a circular pond, under a pergola arch, and on to a central circular lawn with standard roses in beds. A path ran off at right angles on each side of this circular lawn. The lines of the paths were enriched with flower beds and shrubs. Continuing on the main axis beyond the lawn was the rockery, at one time crossed by a bridge to reach the centrally placed bowling green. This was a large rectangular lawn, at right angles to the main axis, surrounded by a clipped yew hedge, with a terrace and balustrade on the north side. Beyond the bowling green was a laburnum walk (also at right angles to the main axis) and beyond that a cedar avenue culminating in one mature elm (now lost). On the east side of the garden was a large walled vegetable garden.

Work on the house began in 1904 and progressed very slowly. The garden façade was built on a terrace with a central flight of steps and was dominated by a large drawing room with full height windows. Behind this rose the observation tower crowned by an octagonal lantern, mirrored by smaller, lower lanterns on each side, partially hidden behind the projecting bays. It was incomplete in 1914, when work stopped, and by 1920 Mackmurdo's financial difficulties forced him to sell it and move to a cottage (Mackmurdo's) which he had built on Goat Lodge Road. It would seem that he never lived in the house. After he had retired from commercial architectural practice in 1906, he developed his

ambition for Great Ruffins to be the centrepiece of a Mackmurdo landscape. This consisted of the nearby Little Ruffins, built for his brother-in-law in 1901; Beacons and a gardener's lodge (now Beacon Cottage) in 1902; Snows Corner, built as a post office and telephone exchange in 1905; Motor Houses in the Kelvedon Road, to accommodate the Great Ruffins staff (and its owner's cars) in 1910; and Wickham Bishops village hall in 1929. Mackmurdo continued his interest in the problems of rural communities and became founding secretary of the Rural Community Council for Essex in 1929. It was probably through his involvement with this organisation that he designed the village halls at Bradwell-on-Sea (in 1932) and at Southminster (in 1933).

The house is now (2009) in single occupancy. Though much of the planting and the beds have been lost, the basic layout, with an axial path passing round two circular beds and leading to the rectangular lawn, has survived.

### **SITE DESCRIPTION**

Though it was not possible to arrange a site visit, the present owner (since 1999) provided a comprehensive description. The garden was very overgrown ten years ago.

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

The site is to the south of Beacon Hill and west of Goat Lodge Road. To the south is open countryside, and another property adjoins to the west. The site is one of the driest places in Essex (rarely more than 22" rain per annum) and is on sand and gravel. The upper part of the site is level but slopes down to the south.

### **ENTRANCES & APPROACHES**

The house is approached by a drive from Beacon Hill. The lodge appears to have been considerably modernised or rebuilt.

### **PRINCIPAL BUILDING**

This is a large Italianate mansion, built by A.H. Mackmurdo and intended for himself. Begun in 1904, it was incomplete in 1914 when construction was halted by the war. It was probably not complete when Mackmurdo sold it in 1920. The house is dominated by a large central tower and has striking views over the garden to the south and to the countryside beyond.

### **REFERENCES**

Grant, J., (ed) 1914 *Essex Historical, Biographical & Pictorial*, London

Bettley, J., & Pevsner, N., 2007 *Buildings of England: Essex*, Yale UP

Skipwith, P., 2004 'Mackmurdo, Arthur Heygate' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, OUP  
Information from the present owners.

Research by Michael Leach. Permission to visit could not be obtained, and the site report was written from available images, as well as from information from the present owners. In view of the importance of this site, it was felt necessary to include this entry, even in the absence of a detailed site visit.