

CHELMFORD CITY COUNCIL
GREAT WALTHAM

LITTLELEY PARK

TL 693 176

An early medieval deer park which was one of Pleshey Castle's detached parks. It was acquired in the mid sixteenth century by Sir Richard Rich to extend his park at Leez Priory, and to provide a new access route to his mansion from the south; it was disparked in at least two stages in the eighteenth century.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Littleley (anciently Littlehey) Park dates back to at least the thirteenth century, as a detached park belonging to Pleshey Castle. There is evidence that it was laid out at an early period when it was possible to adjust roads and boundaries on the perimeter to fit the owner's aspirations. In 1298 it was held by Humphrey de Bohun, earl of Hereford, as part of the Pleshey Castle estates, and by one of his heirs in 1376 (CPR 50 Edward III, 279; Hunter 1994, 119). The first specific reference to its function as a deer park was in an inquisition of 1336 (Reaney 1935, 271). When the male line failed, the Pleshey estates passed by marriage to Thomas Woodstock, duke of Gloucester. In 1397 he was lured from the castle by Richard II, and abducted and assassinated on the directions of the king. Though his widow eventually regained much of her husband's other property, the Pleshey estates were transferred to the Duchy of Lancaster and became the property of the crown. They subsequently formed part of the jointures of the queens of Henry V, Henry VI and Edward IV.

At an unknown date, Littleley Park may have been acquired by the Warner family who owned the adjoining manor of Warners (variously Walls or Warleys) sited on the other side of the Great Waltham to Dunmow road. The manor, probably owned by the Warner family since at least 1365, remained in the family until the death of Henry Warner in 1556, though its exact relationship with Littleley Park remains unclear (Reaney 1935, 18; Morant 1765, 84-5). The acreage given in various Inquisitions Post Mortem of the manorial owners is too small to include the park. Soon after the death of Henry Warner in 1556, both manor and park were acquired by Sir Richard Rich and the park was extended northwards to connect it to the mansion and pleasure grounds of Leez Priory. The venerability of the medieval deer park would have been apparent to any educated Tudor visitor, and would have endowed its parvenu owner with status and respectability. According to Morant, in the park 'there is, or lately was' a chapel built of timber, on the left hand side of the causeway leading from Leez to Great Waltham, just opposite 'the Lodge' (i.e. the farmhouse now named Littleley Park) (Morant 1768, ii, 84-5). This chapel, one of two in the parish of Great Waltham, is referred to as Little Chapel in an inquisition of 1650, and at that date was 'discontinued and Converted to Common Uses; unto which Antiently belonged Certaine Lands and tythes of some considerable value' (Smith 1933, 258). Disputes concerning this chapel, its lands and its associated tithes were not finally resolved until 1818.

The parish and hundred boundaries follow the line of the northern limit of the medieval park, suggesting that the latter already existed when the former were delineated. Rich extended Littleley Park northwards to the southern edge of Leez, increasing its total area to about 260 hectares. The age of the causeway, running from the Dunmow road at Crow Gate to Leez Priory, is not known but its raised

bank would have assisted the crossing of the flood plain of the River Chelmer in wet weather. The Duchy of Lancaster accounts show that a wooden bridge was built (or extensively repaired) in 1464/5 in Littley Park; it seems very likely that this was the bridge that carried the causeway across the Chelmer, providing access from Pleshey Castle to the lodge in Littley Park. The present farmhouse (now confusingly called Littley Park) is appropriately sited for a medieval parker's lodge, and structural evidence shows an unusual building providing lodgings, the earliest parts of which date from about 1470. It was probably intended for overnight accommodation for hunting parties, as well as a residence for the parker himself. The Duchy of Lancaster accounts show that the park lodge was being rethatched in 1464/5 (Ryan 2010, 281, 286).

The northern half of the causeway is dead straight and was probably constructed by Rich to complete the route to his house and to provide a dramatic approach from the south. This upland section is also on a low raised bank which serves no practical function, other than to reinforce the status of its owner, and to emphasize the dramatic view of the roofs and towers of Leez on reaching the crest of the hill.

One of Rich's heirs, the 2nd earl of Warwick (1587-1658), planted an elm avenue along the full 2.5kms of the causeway, perhaps following the example of the great avenue at nearby New Hall, Boreham which was planted in 1624 under the direction of John Tradescant. The last heavily pollarded survivors succumbed to Dutch elm disease in the 1970s, but a few enormous dead bollings survive. The park was still being used for hunting deer in the mid seventeenth century and, even though the southern and western parts had been disparked by 1723, the northern part in 1753 was still 'inclosed within pale and rail and fully stockt with deer' (Hunter 1994, 119-123; Peck 1779, 475; Watkin 1994, 129-131).

The 4th earl of Essex died in 1673 without a male heir, so the estate passed to a nephew, the earl of Manchester. By 1722 it had been sold to the dowager duchess of Buckinghamshire and was described as 'an ancient house in the middle of a beautiful park' (Defoe 1722). By this date the southern and western part of the park had already been disparked. By the middle of the eighteenth century, it had been purchased by Guy's Hospital. The new owners demolished most of Rich's mansion and returned the remaining parkland to agricultural use. After the Second World War, most of the hedges planted as part of the eighteenth century disparking were removed in order to create the large open fields required by modern farming (Hunter 1994, 119-24).

SITE DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, LANDFORM AND SETTING

The park is in the NE corner of Great Waltham parish and lies on the SW and NE sides of the valley of the River Chelmer. It is bounded to the W by the Hartford End road (B 1417), to the E by an unclassified road to Littley Green, to the S by the Chelmsford/Great Dunmow road (A 130) and to the N by Leez Lane, covering an area of about 260 h. A track named the Causeway runs NNE through the park, from Crows Gate on the A130 to the southern entrance to Leez Priory. Another track runs NW/SE from Priors Gate to Littley Green. The tracks intersect at Littley Park, and the section from the farmhouse to Littley Green is now metalled.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

The modern road to Littley Park house from Hartford End was only adopted after the Second World War. The earlier intersecting trackways which crossed at the farmhouse are described above.

PRINCIPAL BUILDINGS

The principal building is now called Littley Park. Examination of this timber-framed building shows that it was built in three stages. The first construction of six bays runs N to S. and is dated to about 1470. This originally had four heated chambers accessed from a central stair and lobby. In about 1585 a wing was added at right angles to the west with two heated chambers, and in the C17 a building constructed from re-used timbers was built northwards from the original house. This final extension may have provided stables, with a granary and hay loft above. Though in the right position for a parker's lodge, the building is more typical of lodgings associated with a medieval hall, so it may have served both functions.

Crow Gate cottage, at the southern end of the causeway, is a thatched timber framed building, dating from between 1570 and 1590 (Watkin 1994, 128-133).

REFERENCES

Books and Articles

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CPR = Calendar of Patent Rolls

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EAH = Essex Archaeology & History

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IPM = Inquisition Post Mortem

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Maps and Images

C1640 Littley Park

1777 Chapman & André's map of Essex plate XII

1799 first edition 1" ordnance survey map

1875 first edition 6" ordnance survey map sheet 33

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