

**CHELMSFORD CITY COUNCIL
DANBURY**

RIFFHAMS

TL 77181 06038

GRADE II

An early C19 house surrounded by a park laid out in 1815 following advice from Humphry Repton.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The estate of which Old Riffhams was a capital messuage was owned by the Clerke family up until 1801. In the late C18 Martha, daughter and heiress of Robert Clerke, married Charles Phillips, who in default of heirs, left the estate to his great-nephew John Robert Spencer. On inheriting in 1809, John took the additional name of Phillips. Instead of altering the old manor house, he chose to build a new mansion on a spectacular site c 600m to the south-west of the old one. He began the house, which he called Riffhams, in 1815, the same year in which Humphry Repton (1752-1818) was called in to give advice on the grounds. Although a Red Book was not prepared, Repton advised on the location of the new house and prepared 'a panoramic sketch of the views from the site proposed for Riffham's Lodge' (Repton watercolour (copy), UEA). In 1836 Wright included an engraving in his History of Essex which shows the early C19 flower gardens and shrubberies. John Spencer died in 1874, aged eighty-seven years. The estate was inherited by his son Major John Charles Spencer-Phillips but was let to a Mrs E Kirk and then to Mr and Mrs Charles Parker in c 1904. During their tenancy the Danbury Flower Show was held in the grounds. In 1928 the house was occupied by Sir Adam and Lady Richie and in 1933 Percy Tyrell Spencer Phillips put it on the market. It was purchased by Sir Follett Holt, a railway engineer. Sir Follett's son sold Riffhams in c 1968 to the Benson family. In 1976 the estate was again put up for sale and the house and park were purchased by the Hindmarch family. The estate remains (2000) in single private ownership.

SITE DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING

Riffhams lies on the north-west edge of the town of Danbury, on the north side of the A414 Chelmsford to Maldon road. The c 20ha triangular site is set in a rural part of Essex, bounded to the north by Blake's Wood, to the east and south-east by Riffhams Lane, and to the west by farmland. Graces Lane cuts through the northern end of the site, dividing the main house and park in the south from Cedar Park in the north. The gently rolling landscape falls south and south-east from the house towards a stream, dammed to create two lakes, which runs from east to west through the centre of the park. The ground then rises again to the southern boundary.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

Riffhams is entered off Graces Lane, through a pair of stone gate piers beside the road. The short, c 50m drive curves south-west to arrive at the gravelled forecourt on the east front, and then continues round to the north of the house into a service courtyard. A second entrance off Graces Lane, c 80m west of the first, leads directly into this courtyard. There is also a track which enters the

southern tip of the park and runs through Hall Wood along the western boundary. This now (2000) continues north to link with Riffhams Farm (located to the west of the boundary of the site here registered) and it is not clear from map evidence whether this was ever used as an approach drive for the main house.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING

Riffhams (listed grade II) is a two-storey country house of white brick, standing on a high point to the north of its park. The entrance front to the east is of seven bays, the southern three projecting slightly with a central Doric portico. The south front, facing the park, has five bays, with a central garden door leading onto a small balustraded terrace. The house was built in 1815-17 for J. R. Spencer Phillips and was extended during the mid C19 by the Holt family. A small carriage house stands beside the north front.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS

The gravelled forecourt below the east front looks onto a lawn divided from the park by a metal fence. Deep mixed shrub borders screen the service courtyard to the north. The small enclosed and balustraded paved terrace below the south front looks onto a sloping lawn on which stands a fine mature cedar of Lebanon and two small urns on plinths. The lawn is enclosed by a metal park fence with extensive views beyond into the park.

The main area of flower gardens lie to the west and south-west of the house and are divided from the service courtyard to the north by a tall wall of white brick surmounted by urns, at the southern end of which a covered loggia has been created (late C20) looking out onto the sloping west lawn. Beyond the loggia the wall, now of red brick, extends west to become the southern wall of the kitchen garden. Beyond the west lawn, c 70m south-west of the house, is a sunken rhododendron dell. Steps from the path below the kitchen garden wall lead south down to a gravel path between azalea and rhododendron beds to a central circular pool, beyond which the path continues and emerges close to the boundary with the park. This feature was added to the gardens in the late C19. On the west side of the Dell is a croquet lawn. To the north of this lies an enclosed hidden woodland garden, while to the south a mid-C20 tennis court has been added beside a small early C20 rose garden with central formal pool. A cherry-lined walk along the boundary with the park runs east past the south end of the tennis court, rose garden, and Dell to link back to the south lawn.

PARK

The park at Riffhams lies mainly to the south of the house, enclosed along its western boundary by Hall Wood, and by thinner belts of trees along the south-east boundary, broken to give views north towards the house and gardens. Within these boundaries the park is laid to grass with a good scatter of mature trees, mainly oak and horse chestnut. At the lowest point in the south park, the stream running through it has been dammed to form two small lakes, c 170m south and south-west of the house. The south park was laid out following advice received from Humphry Repton in 1815 and it remains much as he proposed. To the north of Graces Lane lies Cedar Park. Laid to grass and enclosed by Blake's Wood, this area contains a few mature Cedar of Lebanon which date from the same period as the main body of the park.

KITCHEN GARDEN

The walled kitchen garden lies c 50m to the north-west of the house and appears to have been built at the same time, since one of the walls carries a date plaque of 1815. It is divided by grass paths and box-hedged borders which are cultivated for fruit, vegetables, and cut flowers. A range of C19 glasshouses are currently (2000) under restoration. In the south-east quarter a hedged enclosure screens a mid C20 swimming pool, created by the Benson family following the enlargement of a mid C19 lily pool.

REFERENCES

Books and Articles

T Wright, History of Essex (1836)

N Pevsner and E Radcliffe, The Buildings of England: Essex (1954), p 156

The Garden, (September 1983), p 366

English Heritage Inspector's Report (1988)

F Cowell and G Green, Repton in Essex (2000), pp 115-18

Maps

OS Surveyor's drawings, 1799 (Essex Record Office facsimile)

OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1874 2nd edition published 1897

Illustrations

H Repton, Watercolour, 1815 (copy held at University of East Anglia)

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