

**CHELMFORD CITY COUNCIL**  
**LITTLE LEIGHS**

**LEEZ PRIORY**

**TL 701 185**

The site of a former Austin Canons monastery with its own 100 acre monastic park. After the dissolution Sir Richard Rich built a new mansion and pleasure grounds and added high status parks to the west and south. After the demolition of most of the mansion, and the reversion of both house and the parks to agricultural use in C18, the surviving Tudor buildings and garden were restored to country house use in 1908-15 by Chancellor & Son of Chelmsford

### **HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT**

The date of the foundation of Leez Priory is unknown but it was in existence by the end of the twelfth century. Over the next two centuries the priory steadily acquired property; though much of this was in Suffolk and further afield in Essex, there were significant acquisitions in the adjoining parishes of Little and Great Leighs, Felsted and Little Waltham. In 1381 the prior was granted a license to enclose 100 acres of land and wood in Little Leighs to make a park (CPR 4 Rich 11, 608). The location and boundaries of this park have not been identified, but it was probably largely, or entirely, within the parish of Little Leighs. Nothing is known about the monastic precinct, except that it was probably protected from flooding by a defensive bank along the side of the nearby River Ter to the north (Clapham 1914, 215).

The priory was dissolved in 1536 and swiftly granted, on 27 May of the same year, to Sir Richard Rich (c1496-1567), together with various properties belonging to the priory, including the manors of Great and Little Leighs, and two manors in Felsted. Rich was a ruthless acquirer of recycled monastic property, and an equally ruthless destroyer of other men's reputations when it suited him or his master, the king. The grant provides no information about the priory 'park' of 1381 which possibly no longer existed at that date (L&P Henry VIII, x, 1015, 33). What is clear is that Rich set about converting the priory estate into one of his principal residences, with the demolition of the majority of the priory buildings and the construction of a very substantial brick mansion, built round two courtyards, one of which was faced with stone. The surviving stone conduit (much restored) in the inner courtyard was constructed from re-used fragments of medieval masonry on a Tudor brick base. Rich also acquired land in the neighbouring parishes in order to create two new parks, both of which are shown on Norden's map of 1594. The house remained the principal seat of his direct descendants (subsequently created earls of Warwick) until the death of the last earl in 1673.

Such a mansion would have required a suitably grand setting. No plans or images of the parks and gardens have survived but a visitor to the 2nd earl of Warwick (d.1658) noted the magnificence of his house and its surroundings, adding 'My lord, you had need make sure of heaven or else, when you die, you will be a great loser' (Addison 1973, 156). The 4th earl's funeral sermon in 1673 was preached by Dr Anthony Walker who, as private chaplain to Lady Mary Warwick, would have known the estate

well. Though allowance has to be made for funeral oratory, he described it as 'a secular elysium, a worldly paradise, an heaven upon earth, if there be any such' (Anon 1769, 348).

Some information about the Tudor gardens near the house was provided by excavations in the early C20. Adjoining the inner courtyard to the east (but set at an angle to it) was a brick walled privy garden with a small square gatehouse with octagonal turrets in the north wall, and octagonal summer houses (probably of two storeys) at the northeast and the southeast corners. There was a central circular cistern, and a small gateway in the south wall. Immediately north of the privy garden there was a brick bridge over the River Ter to a footpath to Little Leighs church. It also gave access to 'The Wilderness' which was referred to in the diary of Lady Mary Warwick (1625-1678) as the place in which, winter and summer, she spent two hours each morning in meditation and prayer. The Wilderness was periodically coppiced and contained walks and an arbour. (Smith 1901, 107, 231, 326, 336; ER ii, 41). It is marked as a rectangular enclosure with outward curving ends on the first edition of the 25" OS map.

North of the walled garden there was a bowling green, and a free-standing banqueting house (Clapham 1914, 216). Between the mansion and the last of the chain of lakes of Pond Park was another walled garden which now contains a large pond, with the C16 'Fisherman's Hut' at its northwest corner. However this piece of water is not shown on Chapman & Andre's map and may be a later addition. Undated C17 draft accounts for Leez give some idea of the expenses of maintaining the garden and parks - 'garden charges' were £120, the pond and park keepers cost £20 and £30 respectively, and £10 was spent on palings, presumably for the deer park (ERO D/DU 1509/1).

Information about the surrounding parks can be obtained from various sources. Letters patent of 1595 refer to 'Ponde Park' at Leez (ERO D/DB L1/12/1). When the house was raided for weapons by Royalist forces in 1648, the earl's steward noted that at least 100 deer had been killed by the soldiers 'in the three parks about the house' (Peck 1779, 481). Morant, writing after the estate had reverted to agricultural use, noted that there had been 'three very considerable parks' here, in the parishes of Little Leighs, Felsted and Great Waltham. He referred to Pond Park of about 413 acres (incorrectly described as being sited 'round the house'), and Little or Littley Park of about four miles in circumference in the parish of Great Waltham. He did not identify the third park which might have been the one in Little Leighs parish enclosed by the prior in 1381 (Morant 1768, ii, 100-1). A detailed lease of Leez Priory Farm in 1779 showed that 122 acres of the farm was in Little Leighs parish (ERO D/DGh E15/3). Perhaps this represented the site of the prior's park.

In or soon after 1556, Richard Rich acquired Littley (or Little Lee) Park, a medieval deer park first mentioned in an inquisition of 1336 (Reaney 1935, 271). This park, of roughly rectangular shape and about 260 hectares in area, was sited in the parish of Great Waltham, to the south west of his mansion. He added additional land to extend this park northwards to his new house, providing him with a new access from the Chelmsford/Dunmow road to the south. The northern section of this drive is dead straight (perhaps constructed by Rich), but the southern part curves across the valley floor, and may be part of an older access route to the medieval park lodge in the centre of the park. It crosses the River Chelmer flood plain on a shallow causeway of unknown date. A later descendant of Rich planted an elm avenue along this access route, perhaps following the example of the great avenue at New

Hall, Boreham. Recent studies of Littley Park have found parts of the medieval park pale marked by species-rich hedges, and what was probably the C15 park lodge, extended in the late C16 and further modified in the C19 (now Littley Park house). The park was still being used for hunting deer in the mid C17 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 1994a, 119-123; Peck 1779, 475; Watkin 1994, 129-131).

Rich's second park, Pond Park, was to the north, in the parish of Felsted, and consisted of a chain of 12 substantial lakes, running for 2kms along the course of the infant River Ter. Only one of these still holds water, but the remaining sections of the other dams (as well as the diversionary channel which took the Ter up the side of the valley for 2.5kms) show that this was a very large undertaking. The lakes were identified as fishponds by Morant and numerous later authorities, and as millponds by the RCHM. However their scale is totally disproportionate to either function (and without precedent for monastic fishponds), and it is clear that they were created as part of a spectacular high status landscape. The steward's evidence from 1647-8 indicates that this park was paled and that deer were kept here (Peck 1779, 477, 481). 'Deer house Field' is recorded on a map of 1775 (ERO D/DZ 19). The same map shows a 'Decoy Field' suggesting that this part may have been used for trapping wildfowl before the chain of lakes lost their water. However there can be little doubt that the principal function of this landscape was to demonstrate the status of its new owner. Rich appears to have had a particular affinity towards the parish of Felsted, as he founded the school and the almshouses there, and was buried in a sumptuous tomb in the church. With Pond Park, he also left a spectacular mark on the Felsted landscape.

After the failure of the 4th earl (d.1673) to produce a male heir, 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 the middle of the C18 it had been purchased by Guy's Hospital. The new owners demolished most of Rich's mansion, leaving only the massive gate tower which stood between the two original courts, and part of the service courtyard range to provide accommodation for the tenant farmer. The parkland was returned to agricultural use and the chain of lakes in Pond Park were dry when surveyed in 1775 (ERO D/DZ 19). It is interesting that this survey shows a very irregular pattern of fields, suggesting that the boundary hedges from a much earlier period had been retained by Rich when he laid out Pond Park – possibly as cover for game, or for the management of the deer (Hunter 1994b, 116).

Very little is known about the immediate surroundings of the mansion site during its use as a tenanted farm. Chapman and Andre's map of 1777 shows an enclosed garden just to the west of the house, and a rectangular pond - the southernmost of the chain of lakes forming Pond Park. There are two short lines of trees immediately to the southeast of the house, possibly a relic of former parkland. Two decades later the first edition of the 1" OS map showed the pond but by this date there was a half mile long avenue running north/south to the east of the house, apparently connected to a rectangular enclosure on the north bank of the River Ter. As Leez was only a tenanted farm by this time, these landscape features were probably added by Leighs Lodge which adjoined the Leez estate just to the north and added a large lake just to the east of Leez in the late C19 or early C20.

The house was acquired in 1905 by Montagu Edward Hughes-Hughes who commissioned Chancellor and Sons, the Chelmsford architects, to restore the house (Bettley & Pevsner 2007, 532-3). The surviving drawings do not show if the architect was responsible for the layout of the garden (ERO D/F 8/263) but the possibility remains; the firm certainly had some involvement with designing features in gardens at Beeleigh Abbey and at Creeksea Place, both houses that were being restored and improved for their new wealthy owners (Leach 2010, 11 & 32).

The former parkland is now in agricultural use and in the late 1980s the house was bought by the Country House Weddings Group and was one of the first to be approved for civil weddings.

## **SITE DESCRIPTION**

### **LOCATION, AREA, LANDFORM AND SETTING**

The mansion and pleasure grounds are on the floor of the Ter valley, with the river running along the north edge, possibly in a man-made channel. Lodge Lake and Lavender Lake (not part of the Leez estate) lie to the east, and Pond Park to the west, running along the curving course of the Ter. Littley Park lies to the south east, as far as the A130 Chelmsford to Dunmow Road, and is cut through by the valley of the River Chelmer. Between the two valleys the ground rises to a little over 70m. The third park cannot be identified, but the total area of the three parks would have been about 400 h.

### **ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES**

Today the house lacks a grand approach and is approached by small country lanes from various directions. The access to the outer gatehouse of the main house is flanked by two brick buildings (one probably contemporary with the main house, the other slightly later), later converted into barns by the removal of the internal first floor. These were probably originally stables with lodgings above. The original grand approach to the house was from Crow Gate on the Chelmsford/Dunmow road and it can still be followed on a bridleway named the Causeway. It curves down through Littley Park to cross the floor of the valley of the River Chelmer on a low bank which has been partly erased by modern agriculture. The bridge is a modern utilitarian structure of brick and concrete. The route curves up to, and then beyond, the park lodge to reach a large flat plateau. Here it runs dead straight on a low embankment. At the northern edge of the plateau, the towers and roofs of Leez Priory, and the chain of lakes in Pond Park in the valley of the River Ter, would have come dramatically into view.

### **PRINCIPAL BUILDINGS**

The principal part of Rich's mansion formed the inner court and was demolished in the first half of the eighteenth century, leaving only the inner three storey gate tower. Much of the outer court, containing the service buildings, was demolished at the same time, leaving only the west and part of the south range with its two storey outer gate tower. The two gate towers and the service wings are in red brick (with diaper patterns in blue bricks) and are listed Grade 1. The inner gate tower has battlemented octagonal corner turrets with machicolations, and highly ornamented brick chimney stacks. The conduit in the former inner courtyard, and the two brick barns immediately to the south of the mansion, are listed Grade II.

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### Maps and Images

1775 survey of Pond Park ERO D/DZI 9

1777 Chapman & Andre's map of Essex plate XII

1799 first edition 1" OS map

1807 engraving of Leez Priory by J. Grieg

1875 first edition 25" OS map

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