

**CHELMSFORD CITY COUNCIL
ROXWELL**

SKREENS PARK

TL 620 083 (Old Skrenes, now Shepherds cottage)

TL 627 082 (C17 or earlier and C18 mansion)

TL 625 079 (Scout camp)

Skreens was purchased in 1635 by the Bramston family who developed the estate and parkland until its sale in 1908. They left a legacy of numerous small farms with many 'springs' (narrow woodland strips) in ancient countryside. After a subsequent sale in 1914, the 4500 acre estate was broken up and the mansion demolished. Part of the surviving parkland is now used as a Scout and Guide camp.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Skreens Park takes its name from the Skrene family who are recorded at Skreens from 1393 until 1478. They held legal positions such as serjeant at law but following them there was an unsettled period with several owners and tenants.

The first edition Ordnance Survey map records Old Skrenes at the current location of Shepherds Cottage, and Old Skrenes TL 62020830 is registered as an Historic Environment Record (Roxwell 683) with a medieval moat but little else is currently known about this site. The tithe award of 1842 describes this area as part of Old Skreens. A perambulation of Shellow parish boundaries in 1763 states "A post out of Ryegrass Field to Old Skreens gateway". (Willingale Church magazine). A 1639 map (ERO D/DXa 20) shows features consistent with a large house being in the area shown as Old Skrenes. (More Roxwell Revealed). Aerial photographs show numerous crop marks north of Shepherds Cottage. By the seventeenth century, estate maps record Skreens Park as being a moated site about a kilometre west of this medieval site but no record has been found of the move of Skreens to this new site (TL 627 082).

Richard Weston, a Judge of the Common Pleas, purchased Skreens in 1544 and it remained in Weston ownership until Thomas Weston sold it to the newly appointed Lord Chief Justice, Sir John Bramston, in 1635. For more than 250 years, the Bramston family developed the park and grounds, built a new mansion, re-built Shellow church, developed Roxwell school, moved roads and created a farming estate with many tenanted farms and a landscape designed for a large shooting estate.

More maps were drawn of Skreens than any other estate in Essex in the seventeenth century (Mason) and it is extremely fortunate that the Essex Record Office has four of these estate maps. Most of the built environment has now gone, but many landscape features survive. The earliest map dated at 1625 by the ERO shows no parkland. The next map, drawn in 1635, the year Sir John Bramston purchased the 924 acre estate, is roughly drawn but emphasises the 182 acre park to the south of the mansion. The next two maps, 1639 and 1660, give enormous detail of the moated site. They show straight

avenues and the public road next to the mansion, the garden and field lay-out and use. John Hunter (Pers. comm.) believed the 1660 map by Coffyn showed the remains of the common strip field lay-out and that this landscape was probably once a medieval park which returned to parkland in 1635.

Thomas Bramston (Sir John Bramston the Elder's great-grandson) built a new house of brick on the same site as the seventeenth century mansion sometime between 1710 (White) and 1728 (1914 Sale catalogue). By the time of the 1777 Chapman and André map there is a total change in the designed landscape. A lake has been created on the site of the hop-grounds, the road has been moved away from the mansion and the approaches are becoming informal.

The grounds were greatly improved by Thomas's son and successor, Thomas Berney Bramston (1733-1813). John Johnson was employed for alterations including new stables c.1769-1771 (Briggs), but it is not known for sure who the landscape architect responsible for the major typical eighteenth-century landscaping was. The only written clue discovered so far is contained in a letter of 28th February 1770 from Bamber Gascoigne (1725-1791) to John Strutt (1727-1816) of Terling Place stating:

His [Bramston's] business is to communicate to you Mr. Richmond's intention of visiting Skreens. (Brown).

Gascoigne, Strutt and Bramston were all part of the close circle of Essex Tory MPs and the work is typical of that of Nathaniel Richmond 1723/4 – 1784.

The first edition Ordnance Survey map shows parkland, doubled to 400 acres and now surrounding the mansion, further public road changes, two lodges and winding approach drives. An interesting feature shown on the Ordnance Survey map is the walk round the exterior of the walled garden. The structure of the walled garden is shown almost as it is today, with narrow doors to the north, east and west.

Bramston ownership ceased in 1908 and the new owners, the Nicholson Shaws, greatly increased the house only to sell the 4,500 acre estate six years later. By 1921 the mansion was gone, and the estate had been completely broken up into smallish owner occupied farms. Canon Tinley of St. Luke's church in the London docks purchased the parkland in 1925 and it was used as a holiday home for East End children. When there was no longer a demand for this use Canon Tinley gave the parkland to the Essex Scout Association. The lake is used by St Luke's fishing club.

SITE DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING

Skreens Park, at 72 metres, (the highest point in the immediate area) lies about one mile west of Roxwell. The parkland is used as a Scout and Guide camp; the site of the house and the garden area are owned by a local farmer and are now in one small arable field with the same outline shown on the seventeenth century maps. The extant walled garden is privately owned and only a few roses and box bushes remain of the original plantings. The current boundaries are to the south of the mansion site and are in most parts similar to when the parkland was created about 1635. The location of Old Skreens (near Shepherd's cottage) is now north of the public road from Roxwell to Willingale and although it has been in arable use for many years, recent aerial photos show field boundaries as well as what could be garden features of Old Skreens.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

The approach to the house changed with the development of the park. The east brick built lodge (in the style of Frederick Chancellor) is at the entrance to the east carriage drive created about the time Chapman and André mapped the area. A mile further west on the Roxwell to Willingale road, a Gothic style thatched lodge built about 1812 (Pevsner), is at the current entrance to the Scout and Guide camp. The graceful west drive (mirroring the east drive) is a private drive and public footpath. The avenue of chestnut trees near the camp was planted in the early 1930s by Daniel Hall, who purchased some of the estate buildings in 1921.

PRINCIPAL BUILDINGS

There is almost no trace of the house which was demolished about 1921. An earlier outbuilding is now a private dwelling and the owner also owns the walled garden which survives in good condition. The current scout buildings have been built in a style similar to the initial building erected by Canon Tinley.

PARK

One of the most striking features of the parkland is the numerous small clumps of trees. There are currently seven clumps of three English oak (*Quercus robur*), each of them planted in an equilateral triangle, with the trees nearly always 12-14 yards apart. In addition there are a further three pairs of oak trees which look as if they had originally been in a clump of three. These oak trees appear to be about one hundred years old. Similarly an oak and a lime look as if they have lost a third tree to complete the group. A group of chestnuts (*Castanea hippocastaneum*) between the scout buildings and the lake was felled about 2002. It is likely that the parkland timber was sold either when the Bramston family sold the estate in 1908 or when the estate was broken up from 1914- 1921. The current maturing plantings may be the work of the Nicholson Shaws or early Canon Tinley plantings. Three much older oaks have been retained. One about 200 years old is at the edge of the lake, an older one nearby is on the current park boundary by the site of the ice house. Another veteran oak is at the entrance to the camp, suffered from a fire about 2008 and is currently under-planted and surrounded by tall fencing. Mature willows and older oaks survive in the northeast corner of the site.

The western 20th century parkland boundary went along the Roxwell/Willingale parish boundary and is now a track with a predominantly elm hedgerow to the west and a line of oaks, of about 100 years in age to the east. An ordnance survey map shows this line with conifers. The surroundings of the three acre lake have been recently planted with odd conifers, some willow, alder and birch. One clump of *Lonicera distyla* remains on the northern bank of the lake.

Further planting was done in the 1990s by Rhone–Poulenc when they created the mixed hedge along the south west boundary and planted several groups of nine oaks (*Quercus robur*) in a square of 4x4 metres. The millennium plantings included an extension of the 1999 planting near the climbing wall; the Scout conservation group planted the belt running north/south along the centre of the park and further planting was done in spring 2012.

The site of the ice house is to the south-west of the parkland, but no trace of the ice house can be seen and the local farmer has seldom cultivated this small pocket of land.

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Maps and Images

- 1625 ERO D/DQ 88/1
- 1635 ERO D/DGE P 3.
- 1595-1655 ERO D/DQ 88/1
- 1639 ERO D/DXa/20
- 1666 ERO D/DXa/21
- 1777 Chapman and André's map of Essex Plate XII
- 1842 Roxwell tithe map ERO D/CT 310b
- 1873 25" first edition ordnance survey maps 42.16, 43.13, 51.4, 52.1
- 1914 Skreens Park sales catalogue – private collection

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