

**BRAINTREE DISTRICT COUNCIL  
STISTED**

**STISTED HALL**

**TL 795 246**

Early C19 garden, walled garden and park. Terrace and flowerbeds laid out by Milner c 1896.

**HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT**

Originally a property of Christ Church, Canterbury, the Stisted Hall estate was acquired by the Wiseman family in the mid C16. After the death in 1685 of Mary, widow of Sir Thomas Wiseman of Rivenhall, who lived here with her second husband Thomas Turner, the house was sold to William Lingwood of Braintree. The property was inherited in 1719 by John Savill, whose niece Anne, wife of the Rev. Charles Onley, succeeded to the estate in 1763. As they had no children the property was left to a nephew, Charles Hervey, provided he change his name to Savill-Onley. Shortly after inheriting in 1822, Charles began building a new house and demolished the old one. The property remained in the hands of the Savill-Onleys until 1894, when it was purchased by James Paxman, who thirteen years later sold it to Cecil Sebag-Montefiore with 60ha (150 acres). It was up for sale again in 1915, and was bought by Lionel Faudel-Phillips, who remained there until after 1926. After this there was a succession of occupiers, until sometime after the Second World War the estate was acquired by Essex County Council, when it was converted into a nursing home for the elderly. The house with about 5.5ha (13.5 acres) was acquired in 1995 by the Royal Masonic Benevolent Institution as a residential home.

The original house stood close to the church with the main entrance to the north. A belt of trees, shown on the Ordnance Surveyors' Drawings of 1799, concealed another entrance from the west. In 1823 Charles Savill-Onley obtained permission to close a section of the highway, which led to the church and crossed the front of the old house (Essex Record Office: Q/RHi 4/39). Two illustrations, made shortly before the old building was pulled down, suggest that it had been extended a number of times (Essex Record Office: Mint Portfolio Stisted 1/1-2). Although a string of ponds lying to the east of this house are shown on 1823 plan and on later maps, only one appears to be marked on Chapman and André's map of 1777 and on the OS drawing.

The new house was built on a site to the west of the old one. According to Rush (Seats in Essex, 1897), a framed notice in the building recorded the fact that Onley Savill-Onley, son of Charles Savill-Onley, laid the foundation stone on 27th September 1823, Henry Hakewill was the architect and John Penrice of Colchester superintended the work. A letter dated 1829 suggests that the first hydraulic ram in Essex was installed here by James Easton to provide the house with water (Essex Record Office: D/ADr Z2). By 1839 a new walled garden and park had been created (Essex Record Office: D/CT 335), with additional deciduous and coniferous trees and shrubs planted in the vicinity of the new house, the walled garden, and on the site of the old house. Further belts of trees were planted on the west, north and east boundaries to screen the new park; rounded and irregular clumps were also established. Some straight rows of trees in the southern part of the park may be survivals from former hedgerows. A bridge across the River Blackwater (named as the China Bridge on the first edition OS of 1875) provided access to the new lake, which had been formed by damming a branch of the river; new plantations to the south enclosed the view on this side. The first edition OS also shows a boathouse at the eastern end of the lake.

The sale catalogue of 1893 (Essex Record Office: B8479) gives detailed information on the grounds and gardens. Following general remarks written in the fulsome terms of the estate agent, the specific descriptions starts at the south front, with 'a wide spreading and sloping Lawn in the centre of which is the Flower Garden with artistic geometrical flower beds and commanding a good view of the Park. In front of the Principal Entrance is a Circular Terrace and another Lawn, to the left of the Flower Garden is another spacious Tennis Lawn bordered and shaded by magnificent trees including two grand old Cedar Trees, and contiguous to which is a Fuchsia Walk, and again diverting is the Lily Walk. Overlooking the Lawn is a pretty Loggia supported on two Doric columns and communicating by folding doors with one of the dairies, which on occasions is fitted up as a Fernery... Near it is an excellent conservatory, 37ft 6in x 18ft, paved pathway and heated by a separate boiler; continuing and skirting the park, from which it is separated by an iron rail fence is a Pretty Pleasure Garden in which is an Octagonal Summer House and conducts to the American Garden... On the north, it is bounded by the Kitchen Garden wall and on the east by a noble Avenue of Elms shading a wide gravelled path and forming a most charming Promenade, commencing from the borders of the Park and grounds, it is continued through a pretty brick Archway and shut off by an ornamental gate from the Lime Walk. To the east of the American Garden and bordered by the pleasant Church Walk is the lovely Wilderness, and the Terraced Garden, known as the Square. By Church Walk is a Summerhouse, containing some old carved oak, which overlooks the two pieces of Ornamental Water. The Winding Paths are fringed with Rhododendrons and amongst the numerous timber trees by which it is enclosed are three fine Larches. The Lime Walk passing through the Laurel Garden leads to the North Walk, where again the luxuriant growth of Shrubs and Trees is very noticeable, and the many minor Walks branching therefrom particularly cool and enjoyable'.

The kitchen gardens were described as 'two in number. The principal one is surrounded by walls 10 to 14 feet high and is well stocked with Wall, Espalier, Standard and Pyramid Fruit Trees. In the centre is a Fountain and Summerhouse festooned round with Climbing Roses on iron standards and archways and a walk thus enclosed, is continued to the Pleasure Garden and is known as the Rosary Walk. The second Kitchen Garden is walled in on three sides. The Rosary Garden is enclosed by walls with choice fruit trees and thickly studded with well selected Standard Rose Trees'. Two high lean-to vineries, 33ft x 21ft 6in and 30ft x 21ft 3in, a range of 8-light pits, melon and cucumber pits, vinery and peach house, stove house 47ft 6in x 14ft 6in, two tomato houses each 36ft x 13ft, brick and slate tool sheds, potting sheds, 6-bay tool and store shed, potato cellar, gardeners' WC. 'capital ice house' and a large store room completed the garden buildings. This layout is recorded on the plan accompanying the sale catalogue.

In 1897 Rush, in *Seats in Essex*, noted the exceedingly fine specimens of cedar, spruce and copper beech; the rhododendrons and azaleas; and the summerhouse 'composed partly of oak panelling from the old mansion'. He also commented on Paxton's alterations to the house and 'the prettily designed flower gardens, and terrace, ... lately added to and greatly improved by Mr. Milner's suggestions'. Paxton bought Stisted Hall in 1894, but there is no indication on the second edition 25" OS of 1896 of a terrace along the south front. It therefore seems that Henry Ernest Milner's work can be dated to 1896, just before *Seats in Essex* was published. This new layout is recorded on the third edition OS of 1923, and also on a series of photographs by Spalding, which are presumably pre 1901 as Spalding was still under the patronage of 'the Prince of Wales' (see illustration).

John Grant, in *Essex, Historical, Biographical and Pictorial* [1913], provides further information on the garden at that date. The author is very inaccurate when describing earlier periods of the properties he discusses and was probably relying on what the current owners told him. He does not mention Milner in connection with Stisted, but says, 'Since their advent, Mr. and Mrs. Sebag-Montefiore have totally changed the entire aspect of the southern side of the house, which, now laid out in terraces and lawns, commands many pleasing vistas of the well-tended luxuriant gardens, the enthusiastic

interest of Mrs. Sebag-Montefiore'. Without a precise date for the Spalding photos, it is impossible to be sure that the terraces he recorded were of Milner's design, but this seems very likely. Grant also mentions that the site of the old hall had been planted as an orchard; some of the shrubberies had been cleared away in order to open up vistas into the surrounding grounds; and rockeries, cascades, fountains and a rustic bridge had been introduced into the area of the four old ponds. The banks of one pond had been planted with lavender, roses and herbaceous plants and a woodland garden had been created round another. Some of these changes can be seen on the third edition 25" OS, which however also probably records alterations made by Paxton. Grant noted the fine elm and lime avenue and particularly mentioned the gigantic plane tree near the site of the old house. It was thought to be the finest in Essex at the time.

In 1915, the mansion and gardens occupied 6ha (15 acres), and the park, plantations and water extended to 52ha (128 acres) (Essex Record Office: D/DU 2055/168). A second rock garden had been created near the croquet lawn, close to the two old cedars. The park was described as 'thickly timbered with magnificent oak and elm trees, with specimens of ornamental timber and slopes down to the River Blackwater, which forms the southern boundary. Beyond are two meadows backed by the ornamental lake, which, with the river, afford capital fishing'.

## **SITE DESCRIPTION**

### **LOCATION**

Stisted Hall lies approximately 4km (2.5 miles) north-east of Braintree town centre. The River Blackwater forms the southern boundary of the park.

### **PRINCIPAL BUILDING**

The present Stisted Hall (listed Grade II\*) was built in the Classical style in 1823. It is constructed of white brick with stone dressings and has a slate and lead roof. A stable range, coach house and ancillary buildings (Grade II) were built at the same time in the vicinity of the house. The early C19 icehouse is listed Grade II.

## **REFERENCES**

- P Morant, *History and Antiquities of the County of Essex*, ii, 1768  
T Wright, *History of Essex*, ii, 1835 (includes engravings)  
J A Rush, *Seats in Essex*, 1897  
J Grant, *Essex, Historical, Biographical and Pictorial* nd. [1913]  
B Ballard, *The History of Stisted Hall*, 1998  
English Heritage, *List of Buildings of Special Architectural and Historical Interest* (listing includes house, stable range and yard and ancillary buildings and icehouse)

### **Maps**

- Chapman and André, *Map of Essex*, 1777  
Ordnance Surveyor's drawing 1799  
Woodrow and Newton of Norwich, *Highway and Footpath Closure Plan 1823*, Essex Record Office, Q/RHi 4/39  
Tithe Map 1839 Essex Record Office, D/CT 335.  
OS 25" to 1 mile scale first edition 1875  
OS New Series third edition 1923  
Plan of Stisted Hall, *Pleasure Grounds, Park and Village*, 1893, Essex Record Office Sale Cat. B8479

**Archival Items**

Letter, 1829, (D/Dar Z2); Sale catalogue, 1893, Essex Record Office, B8479; Sale catalogue, 1915, Essex Record Office, D/DU 205/168.

**Pictorial Evidence**

Sepia painting of old Stisted Hall, 1815 (Mint Portfolio Stisted 1/2)

Pencil sketch of old Stisted Hall, c 1825 (Mint Portfolio Stisted 1/1)

Two engravings of Stisted Hall, drawn by W. Bartlett 1833 for Wright's History of Essex

Photographs by Fred Spalding, nd. pre 1901 (Essex Record Office).

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