

**TL 463387**

Late C18 maps show a formal garden and two avenues of trees. This plan survived the C19 and with small alterations until 1925. In 1935 the house was destroyed by fire.

**HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT**

An estate known as Wendon Loughts was in existence in 1301. The house is said to have been built in 1589 by Thomas Crawley and mainly rebuilt in 1805-6 by the Wilkes family. Morant gives details of a number of families including Robert Meade from 1600 and Richard Chamberlain in 1722 who owned and rebuilt the house until the arrival of Nathaniel Wilkes in 1739. The estate was passed through the Wilkes family until the death of John Wilkes (1771-1848) who died leaving no heir. He left Lofts Hall to his cousin Robert Fiske, Rector of Wendon Lofts and Vicar of Elmdon. Robert assumed the name and arms of 'Wilkes of Lofts Hall' and he and his heirs continued in residence until about 1927 when the estate was sold to a property dealer. It then passed through several hands before being bought by Dr. Graham Watson in 1934, but the house was destroyed by fire a year later. The Graham Watsons decided to live locally in Lendon Lodge until the house was rebuilt, but this was delayed by the war and not begun until 1965. They only lived in the house for eighteen months, and then it was sold to Major Christopher Philipson who died in 2002. His widow is still living in the house.

Muilman (1770) mentions 'a large old edifice with an inner court.....on its north side pleasant Gardens, on the south side a fine canal.' He says that large sums of money had been spent on the estate. Chapman and André's map of 1777 shows two avenues of trees bordering the garden, one from north to south and the other from west to east. A book of maps of the estate commissioned by John (Liberty) Wilkes in 1790 shows a garden of over four acres to the north-east and south-east of the house with three rectangular pieces of water, one large enough to be a boating or fishing lake. There is a layout of straight paths leading from the house to the avenue which seems to show that the garden was laid out no later than the first half of the C18, after which it would be expected that the influence of the English landscape designers and their serpentine curves to be the fashion. It is not clear when the avenues were planted but they are marked on Chapman and André. In 1664 John Evelyn wrote *Sylva, or a Discourse on Forest Trees* where he talks 'of the perfections of the lime its unparalleled beauty for walks'. Robert Meade was the owner at that time and it is possible he was inspired to plant an avenue. The avenue is currently planted with limes, but there is no evidence that this species was the original planting. A large dovecote, possibly dating from C16, is on the site, which together with the fish from the larger piece of water probably provided food for the household, and possible income from the sale of the squabs and fish. Unfortunately no evidence of the planning or planting of the gardens has been found.

The enclosure map of 1824-9 shows no alteration to the lakes but the 25" OS of 1877 and 1896 show the garden in greater detail with a general plan that has changed little from that of 1790. The shape of the lakes is unchanged, and the paths are still straight. When the estate was put up for sale in 1925

the map accompanying the sale particulars showed the two larger pieces of water, but the smaller lake is not marked. Perhaps this lake was filled in to enlarge the kitchen garden. The small orchard or copse marked on the 1790 map is still in existence.

The 1960 aerial photograph shows the site after the demolition of the house and before the rebuilding. The quartered lawn, which is possibly the rose garden shown in the sale catalogue of 1925, appears on all the aerial photographs from 1960-1990. The north-south avenue of trees shown on Chapman and André are still visible on the 1990 photograph but trees to the east-west have disappeared. The 1970, 1980 and 1990 photographs show the position of the new house which is not built on the original plot but now faces south and is on part of the old garden.

In the grounds, the original C12 St. Dunstan's Church was rebuilt in 1845-6 when a mid C12 doorway from the former church was reset in the south wall of the nave. It was closed in 1928 and is now a ruin.

The C16 century dovecote stands in the centre of the nearby farmstead. It is octagonal, with sides of about eleven foot (external measurement), and a total height of about forty foot. It contains 1500 timber nests and is possibly the finest in Essex.

## **SITE DESCRIPTION**

### **LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM & SETTING**

Lofts Hall is to the south of Elmdon, in the former parish of Wendon Lofts whose abandoned parish church adjoins the garden of the house. The area of the park has varied considerably over the last two centuries (approximately 126 hectares in 1790). The land falls to the south, giving good views over open countryside.

### **ENTRANCES & APPROACHES**

The house is approached from the north along a lime avenue (a mixture of young trees, and older specimens in poor condition pollarded by the present owner). The single storey entrance lodge is plastered, probably 19<sup>th</sup> century. A second entrance from the east is now closed, but a similar lodge (now enlarged) survives. A new access to the south east was formed in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and there is a contemporary two storey lodge near the public road.

### **PRINCIPAL BUILDING**

Lofts Hall was designed by Ian B. M. Hamilton in the neo-Georgian style and built in 1964-65 (executive architects Alan Chalmers and John Munday), immediately north west of the site of the earlier house burnt down in 1935. The central block is symmetrical and has a service wing and garages to the east. Beyond this is a group of older service buildings, a 19<sup>th</sup> century single storey outbuilding (called the 'laundry'), and a timber framed barn (with curved windbraces in the roof), which formed a yard adjoining the north end of the house. This yard is entered through an archway in the barn. To the south east is another group of buildings, the derelict ivy-covered parish church, and the farmhouse and farm buildings of various periods, including the octagonal brick dovecote with all its internal fittings.

## REFERENCES

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Mullman, P., 1769 *History of Essex*, iii  
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Essex County Council aerial photographs 1960-1990

## Maps

Chapman and Andre 1777 sheet 1  
Survey map of Lofts Mansion House and Grounds surveyor Martin Nockolds 1790  
Ordnance surveyor's drawings 1799  
OS 6" to 1 mile 1<sup>st</sup> edition 1876 sheet 8  
OS 25" to 1 mile 1<sup>st</sup> edition 1877 sheet 8  
OS 6" to 1 mile 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1898 sheet 8 NW  
OS 25" to 1 mile new series 1921  
OS 1: 25000 TL 43/53 1986

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