

### UfdG19 The Gibson Boulders, Saffron Walden

**Site location:** The Gibson Boulders, Margaret Way, Saffron Walden, Essex

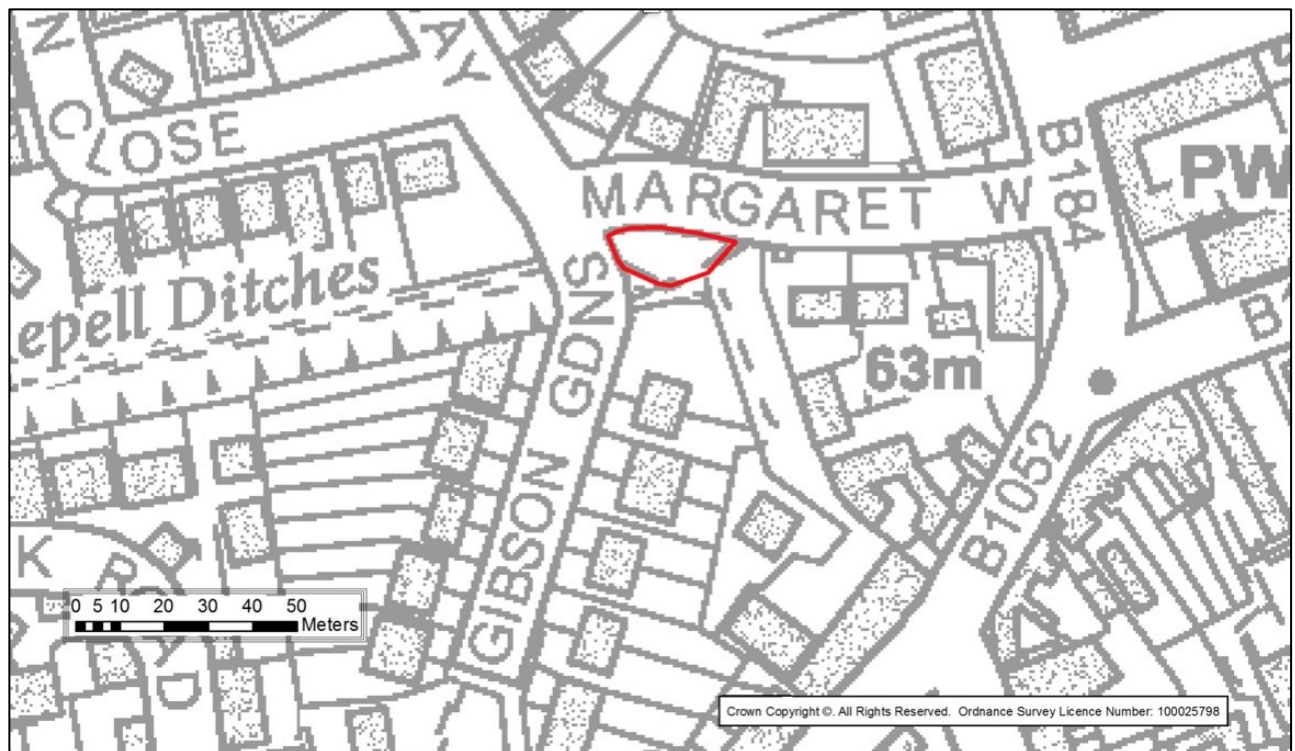
**Grid reference:** TL 5369 3817

**Status:** Accessible at all times

**Summary of the geological interest:**

At the junction of Gibson Gardens and Margaret Way is a mound of grass with a few trees and a number of large boulders, some lying on the surface and others poking through the grass. This mound in fact contains the largest number and greatest variety of erratic boulders in Essex, all of them brought to this spot by the owner of the land in the nineteenth century.

Erratic boulders are stones that have been transported by ice and these particular examples were carried to Essex by the great Anglian Ice Sheet which covered almost the whole of Britain during the coldest period of the Ice Age, some 450,000 years ago. Boulders such as these would have been frequently found in clay pits and gravel pits which were common around Saffron Walden in Victorian times.



**Site Assessment.** Local Geological Sites (LoGS) in Essex are assessed using criteria based on DEFRA guidance. An assessment form is used which asks key questions under four value categories: scientific, educational, historical and aesthetic. This site has been assessed and qualifies under these criteria.

## **Scientific interest and site importance**

There are at least 25 boulders visible, of varying sizes up to 1.2 metres long. Most are obscured by vegetation and some almost completely buried. It is likely that there are many more buried in the mound. At least 9 different rock types are represented, some of which are distinctive rocks from the north of England and Scotland. The study of erratics can provide valuable clues to the flow of ice across the country and the nature of the landscape during the Ice Age.

The rock types include sedimentary rocks such as sarsens, puddingstone, sandstone, Millstone Grit, limestone and septarian nodules. There are also igneous rocks such as granite, dolerite and basalt. The largest boulder is a slab of colourful puddingstone approximately 1.2 metres long lying on its side in the centre of the mound.

This mound is of scientific and educational importance as it contains the largest number and greatest variety of erratic boulders in Essex. The stones link geology and social history and can tell a story not only about the Ice Age but also about the history of the town and one of its most famous residents.

## **History of the mound**

The Gibson Gardens housing estate was built on land which was formerly the magnificent gardens at the rear of Hill House in the High Street. An 1877 map shows that this mound was a feature in the gardens and was the site of a summer house, the brick foundations of which can still be seen today. Until his death in 1883, the house and gardens were owned by George Stacey Gibson, naturalist and author of the first *Flora of Essex* which was the standard work on Essex botany until the 1970s. Gibson also had a great interest in geology (his collection of over 6,000 fossils was donated to Saffron Walden Museum on his death) and there seems little doubt that he must have formed this collection of unusual boulders in his garden, now completely lost to development. It is very fortunate that this mound site has survived. It has been said that there is evidence that the mound contained an ice house.

An article on the site was published in 2003 (Lucy 2003). Photographs exist in Saffron Walden Museum of Hill House and gardens in their heyday (Pole 1997). A photograph of the summerhouse, taken in 1952, shows boulders at the base of the mound (Campbell 2000).

The site has recently been tidied, the boulders uncovered again and an informative signboard erected alongside to explain their origin, officially unveiled in May 2026

## **References**


- Campbell, D. 2000. **Saffron Walden through David Campbell's camera**. W. Hart and Son.
- Lucy, G. 2003. **The Gibson Boulders: A remarkable collection of Ice Age boulders in Saffron Walden**. *Saffron Walden Historical Journal*. 3(5): 8-9.
- Pole, L. 1997. **Britain in Old Photographs: Saffron Walden**. Sutton Publishing. Pages 88 & 92.



The Gibson Boulders.  
Photo: G.Lucy


# THE GIBSON BOULDERS

## A unique rockery of glacial erratics from across the UK



**George Stacey Gibson** was a prominent Victorian philanthropist, his family owning a brewery, public houses and a bank in the town. He was a keen naturalist and author of the first Flora of Essex in 1862. He was also interested in geology and donated his extensive fossil collection to Saffron Walden Museum. His curiosity in rocks must have led to this amazing collection of boulders.

**Glacial Erratic**  
A boulder carried by ice from its original location and dumped onto rocks of a different type and age.



**Basalt/Dolerite**  
From the Whin Sill in Northumberland.

**Gneiss**  
from Norway

**Carboniferous Limestone**  
from the Pennines.

**Sarsen Stone**  
from north Essex, with characteristic roodlet hole.


**Spilsby Sandstone**  
from Lincolnshire, of lower Cretaceous age, matched using the fossil traces in it.

**Septarian Nodule**  
from the Jurassic rocks of Lincolnshire.


**Fossiliferous Limestone**  
from the Jurassic seabed preserved in the rocks of Lincolnshire.

**Puddingstone**  
from Herefordshire or northwest Essex.

**A Giant Rockery**  
These boulders were found in the fields around Saffron Walden. They were collected and assembled into a prominent feature in the extensive gardens of Hill House, on the High Street, the Gibson residence. The brick foundations of a summerhouse are at the rear of the site and under the mound was an icehouse, accessed by a tunnel, the remains of which are still visible.



Miss Mary Gibson's summerhouse in the garden of Hill House photo 1952



Hill House gardens plan 1877

**Boulders brought by rivers and ice**  
Puddingstones and sarsen stones have not moved far. They were formed in our local area during hot desert conditions around 58 million years ago. Both rock types are made from sand grains naturally cemented together by silica (quartz), with puddingstone including flint pebbles as well as sand.

The Gibson Boulders Signboard installed in May 2026. Photo: D. Davey