LOCAL GEOLOGICAL SITES
UTTLESFORD DISTRICT

GeoEssex
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UfdG15 Elm Grove Summer House

Site location: In the grounds of Elm Grove, Saffron Walden

Grid Reference: TL 5398 3828

Status: Privately owned.
Access only available by arrangement with the Estate Manager.

Summary of the geological interest:

Elm Grove is a development of flats and bungalows for older persons which were built on land which was formerly the rear garden of a large property in Audley Road, also called Elm Grove (later known as Walden Grove), which was demolished in the early 1970s. Against the eastern flint boundary wall is a small structure built as a summer house or grotto in the former garden. The summer house is remarkable as it is built almost entirely from glacial erratic boulders brought to Essex by an ice sheet during the Ice Age (Lucy 2015).

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. They would also have been encountered in fields whilst ploughing.

There are at least 20 boulders of different rock types, 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.

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.*

Date of notification: September 2017
Revised: March 2020 and July 2026

Scientific interest and site importance

The former house known as Elm Grove was built in 1828 by Jabez Gibson (1794-1838) but he never lived there. Jabez Gibson was a well known local figure and contributor to the prosperity of the town. In 1830 he set up the town's own waterworks company and in 1832 was a co-founder of the town's Literary and Scientific Institution and the Natural History Society, which ran the town's new museum. It is likely, therefore, that he would have had an interest in what was then the very new science of geology and gathered these boulders from surrounding farmland for use in the garden, although the actual date the summer house was constructed is not known.

At least 20 boulders have been used in its construction and at least 6 different rock types are represented. The rocks are derived from near and far, for example there are large blocks of local calcrete, a rock consisting of hard chalk fragments cemented together, and two weathered boulders probably from Derbyshire: one of Carboniferous Limestone (with crinoid fossils), and one of Millstone Grit. Of particular interest are the septarian nodules which have been cut in half to reveal the calcite-filled cracks and positioned to make the rear wall. These would originally have been polished which would have provided a spectacular effect. The largest boulder of all is a giant puddingstone 2.6 by 1.2 metres (9 feet by 4 feet) in size at the base of the south wall, which may be the largest puddingstone in Essex. Part of this stone contains no pebbles and is therefore similar to a sarsen.

Built into the south wall is a **sarsen stone** about 1.2 metres (4 feet) square known as the ‘Hangman's Stone’ or ‘Sheepstealer’s Stone’. This stone was originally on land at nearby Littlebury and Jabez Gibson obtained permission from the landowner, Lord Braybrooke of Audley End, to remove it to his garden at Elm Grove (Braybrook 1856, Rowntree 1954). In his paper on Essex boulders, Salter (1914) states that the Littlebury Sheepstealer’s Stone "has disappeared", clearly unaware of its new role. The stone is of significant geological interest as it has a hole passing completely through it that was formed by a root of a tree that was living on the sandy ground in which the sarsen was formed, some 55 million years ago. It also has striations that are thought to have been produced when the stone was trapped at the base of a moving ice sheet and scored by rock fragments in the ice under great pressure (see photo). This is the only known occurrence of glacial striations on a sarsen stone. There is a fanciful story to account for the name of this stone (Grinsell 1985, Gumbrell 1989), but it has no basis in fact*.

The only part of the structure that is not of erratic boulders is the roof, which consists of sawn slabs of imported **York Stone**, a sandstone from Yorkshire. It is possible that this was added later.

Other information

The summer house is in a dilapidated condition but is structurally sound.

The summer house is not the only structure in the garden to survive the subsequent redevelopment. In the centre of the grounds is the prominent ruin of a delightful flint 'folly' which was once used as a tiny museum. The folly is a Grade 2 listed building.

Elm Grove is private property and permission for access must be obtained from the Estate Manager. The summer house is marked on the large scale 1919 Ordnance Survey map but inexplicably it is not marked on the most recent large scale digital 1:2,500 scale maps.

**This story, passed down through the generations, tells of a sheep-stealer who was carrying a stolen sheep home when he stopped to rest beside the stone. As he slept, the sheep struggled to break free, causing the rope to which it was tethered to become twisted around the man's neck and strangle him. Grinsell (1985) notes that there are numerous stones in sheep-farming areas throughout the UK with similar names and associated legends. This cautionary tale may date back to the mid-eighteenth century, when sheep-stealing had become so prevalent that a law was passed making it punishable by death.*

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References

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GUMBRELL, J. 1989. **Down your street: Part 1**. Jean Gumbrell. Pages 92-96.

LUCY, G. 2015. **The Elm Grove Summerhouse: A geological curiosity.** *Saffron Walden Historical Journal.* No. 29. Pages 33-34.

ROWNTREE, C.B. (1954) **Legacies of the Ice Age in Essex**. *Essex Countryside*. Vol. 2(6): Pages 58-59.

SALTER, A.E. (1914) **Sarsen, basalt and other boulders in Essex**. *Essex Naturalist*. 17: 186-199.

The Elm Grove Summer House.

The giant Hertfordshire Puddingstone boulder is at the base of the right-hand wall. Sitting on top of this (just visible at the rear) is the sarsen stone known as the 'Hangman's Stone'.

Photo: G. Lucy (Aug 2024)

The surface of the Hangman's Stone showing striations thought to have been caused when the stone was trapped at the base of a moving ice sheet, 450,000 years ago.

Photo: G. Lucy (Sept 2021)

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