

On the morning of Tuesday 22nd April 1884 deep-seated rocks between Colchester and West Mersea moved, resulting on the surface of the ground in severe damage to more than 1,200 buildings in the district, including twenty churches.

The Essex Standard, Colchester, sent a telegram to the Ipswich Journal: 'Shock very severe here. Spire of the Congregational Chapel wrecked. Endless chimney stacks down and much other damage done. No lives lost.'

From the next day's (23rd) East Anglian Daily Times we learn more. At Colchester, at 9h 17m 44 sec Greenwich mean time, a distant rumbling under the surface of the ground was heard, with no little consternation, by people out of doors at the time. It grew in intensity for several seconds. A brief lull was followed by four shocks, the first three, which increased in magnitude, succeeded each other at intervals of about a second and a half; there was then a slightly longer period and then a fourth shock, considerably less violent than the others.

An eye-witness stated that the stone spire of the Congregational Church in Lion Walk, Colchester, oscillated several times before a considerable portion fell to the ground, crumbling to pieces as it fell.

In the village of Peldon a bystander said that the Peldon Rose Inn appeared to upheave and the middle of the roof to open and a mass of bricks and chimney pots fell into the interior. Persons in the fields stated that it was with great difficulty they were able to keep their feet.

At Wivenhoe, hundreds of chimney pots and thousands of bricks and debris strewed the streets.

The East Anglian Daily Times also reported that at East Mersea the sea was said to have rushed with restless force over the marshes, receding some time afterwards, leaving thick deposits of sand behind.

The Essex Chronicle of 25th April 1884 had further reports. At Kelvedon, a workman who was down a deep well at the time of the shock said he felt the shaking very severely. At West Mersea the surface of the ground was cracked, sufficiently to put one's hand into, for about a hundred yards.

Additional information on the earthquake was collected and reported by R. Meldola and W. White in the 1885 Essex Field Club Special Memoir no. 1.

At the Church of St Stephen, Great Wigborough (south of Colchester), two of the corner pinnacles were thrown down from the tower, one falling on to the nave and damaging the roof. The tower was rebuilt, with money raised by public subscription and help from a relief fund

opened at the Mansion House by the Lord Mayor of London. At the Church of St Nicholas, Little Wighborough, the rector, the Rev. Frederick Watson, reported to the Mansion House 'the body of the church has separated from the tower, and I cannot think of ever having any more service in it.' However, restoration work followed a donation of £300 from the family of the rector and £200 from the Mansion House Appeal Fund. A memorial brass plaque in the church reads —

TO THE GLORY OF GOD AND IN AFFECTIONATE MEMORY OF  
Juliana Elizabeth Watson the tower of this church was  
rebuilt out of a bequest left by the late Sophia Watson  
by the Rev. Frederick Watson M.A. rector of this parish  
after the earthquake of April 22 1884 IN THE YEARS 1885 & 1886

There is also a memorial in Great Wighborough church.

The chief damage to buildings occurred on London Clay, rather than gravel.

A slight shock had also been recorded at Peldon and Mersea Island two months earlier, at about quarter-past one on the morning of 18th February 1884.

One hundred years later, the Centenary of the Essex earthquake was commemorated as 'Quake '84' at Peldon village over the weekend 21-23 April 1984. Tony Bindloss brought this event to my attention and the Rev. E. C. Lenden provided me with further information. Events included an exhibition in Peldon Village Hall, with a display of original photographs, contemporary drawings, newspaper accounts, and repair bills. Souvenirs sold included blue birds inscribed 'Peldon Earthquake Centenary '84', price 20p, and a limited edition commemorative post card depicting four original earthquake scenes, produced by the Colchester and District Postcard Club, 20p..

An exhibition about the earthquake, in Colchester Natural History Museum in 1984 stated that the earthquake was quite shallow, possibly as little as 4 kilometres, and 5 1/4 on the Richter scale; the British Geological Survey's 2006 leaflet 'Earthquakes in the UK' stated the magnitude as 4.6.