

THE GREAT GARDENS OF WANSTEAD PARK

The following is a reprise of the presentation given by Dr. Sally Jeffery, of Birkbeck College, to a meeting organised by the Friends of Wanstead Parklands on 8 September 2010. The original was based around a slide show, but it has been recast as text, using Dr Jeffery's own notes as far as possible.

The gardens of Wanstead Park began their evolution in the late seventeenth century, when the estate was bought by Sir Josiah Child of the East India Company. Further major changes were made early in the following century in the formal style by George London for his son, Richard. It was Richard Child who commissioned the grand new Palladian house designed by Colen Campbell, which was completed by c.1725.

The gardens at Wanstead were being modified very soon after their creation, and these modifications continued during the 18th century. However, the early formal skeleton was largely retained. There were further changes at the beginning of the 19th century on the advice of Humphry Repton, before the landscape fell into abandon and decay after the bankruptcy of the owners and the sale and demolition of the house in the 1820s.

At present, the site of the house and gardens is principally divided between the Corporation of London (which owns the major part of the grounds) and Wanstead Golf Club (which owns the site of the house and its forecourt and approaches).

I am going to look at the way the gardens developed from the early 18th century until the sale and demolition of the house. This was an estate of great wealth and status, and they went through some very dramatic changes. Unfortunately, there are only a few surviving documents, mainly comprising a number of maps and plans, supplemented by some paintings and engravings. It is accordingly more of a visual history, trying to work out what happened from the evidence available.

In the second decade of the 19th century both Humphry Repton and Lewis Kennedy made reports on the grounds. We'll look in some detail at these to establish the state of the gardens then, and what was carried out as a result of their reports.

The old Wanstead House dated from the mid 16th century. Josiah Child lived there from about 1668, and purchased the estate in 1673-4. It is shown in an engraving by Kip and Knyff as a large, irregular, many-gabled building which had evidently grown over the years. By 1713, when Kip and Knyff made their views of the estate, the work of Sir Josiah in laying out fishponds, avenues and orchards was evident.

Daniel Defoe, in his *Tour through the Eastern Counties of England* (1722) says that Sir Richard Child, Josiah's son, 'laid out the most delicious as well as the most spacious pieces of Ground for Gardens that is to be seen in this part of England' before he began the foundations for his new house. According to Stephen Switzer, writing in 1718 in *Ichnographia Rustica*, the work was begun in 1706 and was one of George London's last undertakings. There are other descriptions from this period by Macky (1722), Defoe (1724), and Fougeroux (1728).

The gardens may have drawn their inspiration from France, and have been compared to those at Versailles.

In Kip and Knyff's view to the east, various features deserve mention -

- Two pools at the entrance with grand avenues and gates
- Canal with octagonal end
- Bowling green. Ironwork perhaps by Tijou
- Statues: inspired by Versailles? Fragments have been found in one of the lakes.
- Elaborate gardens close to house.
- Parterres of grass cut work
- Gardens with low hedges and flowering plants, statues, pools
- Wildernesses to east - Diagonal paths through, lined with trees
- Orchards, kitchen gardens, fishponds
- Another long canal on the central axis

Prominently visible are a pair of mazes and a pair of mounts set in the midst of meandering walks. A poem of 1713 refers to the snail mounts 'now raising', with an 'artful spiral Circle round'.

In Kip and Knyff's view to the north may be seen a large orangery, perhaps by Talman. This was in brick, with such features as a double bath, a heated room, a bedroom and print rooms. It was demolished in 1799. There is also a banqueting house, or summer house, also perhaps by Talman. This was apparently two storey, possibly with some sort of grotto beneath.

Morant's History of Essex (1768) shows the forecourt of the new Palladian house with ha-ha, gates, drive and grass. There are balustrades each side with urns and obelisks, and two statues identified as Hercules and Omphale.

George Vertue refers in his notebooks to Omphale by Peter Scheemakers and Hercules by Laurent Delvaux. These were sold in the Wanstead sale of 1822, and the Hercules is now at Waddesdon. It is of an unusual type: Hercules usually appears with club and lionskin, symbols of virtue and strength. Here, however, he is shown with a distaff. This refers to the story of his love for Omphale, Queen of Lydia, for whom he laboured at spinning and other female tasks –she wore the lion skin!

A painting attributed to Charles Catton, at Parham Park, West Sussex, which is thought to date from around 1735, shows Wanstead Park and the "Great Octagon Basin". This seems to have been formed before 1722, when Macky described the place, mentioning that the two ponds on the approach road had been joined to form 'a Bason of Water of near half a Mile in Circumference on which my Lord keeps a Gondola for his Pleasure'.

George London had died in early 1714, and Adam Holt was referred to as Sir Richard Child's gardener in 1715. The latter may well have been responsible for the formation of the Octagon Basin – he favoured polygonal pools elsewhere. The Holt family seems to have had a strong connection with Wanstead. We find Thomas Holt acting as agent to Lady Emma Child, and keeping books of expenditure for her from 1695 to 1715, and he appears on the title deeds of leases too. His name occurs also in Child's bank accounts, handling large sums of money at about the same time. It seems likely that Thomas and Adam Holt were somehow related, although no proof of this has been found thus far.

It appears from Roque's engraving from the 1730s that wings were envisaged for the house, though in the event these were never constructed.

The plan of Wanstead, by James Cradock, from 1725, marks a period of great change in the gardens - a shift from strict formality with just small areas of winding paths to a very informal arrangement with large areas of water. The great chain of lakes around the gardens at Wanstead were not there at the time Kip & Knyff recorded the scene in about 1713. However, they are recorded on Cradock's map of part of the

estate in 1725, which seems to have been a survey. Creating the lakes must have been a lengthy, time consuming and difficult job, demanding great vision and also skill in hydraulic engineering.

Adam Holt was certainly involved in large-scale water engineering at Coopersale, Essex, as Fiona Cowell has shown, so he may have been responsible at Wanstead. However, William Kent, who was working on the ceilings in the house in the 1720s, was advising Lord Burlington on his gardens at Chiswick, including the water features, at this time.

The new water gardens were shown in very crude form by a visiting Frenchman, Pierre Jacques Fougereux, in 1728. Cradock's plan records earthworks, the fortified island, and the gardener's house.

Another painting attributed to Catton also helps to build a picture of Wanstead around 1730 - a Bird's Eye View of Wanstead from the east. This is an unusual point of view which shows the water very well, and may have been chosen for just that purpose. It shows almost exactly what was drawn by Cradock, and might also therefore be a reliable record.

There is evidence of considerable earth-working at Wanstead at this time. "Amphitheatres" were constructed, one of which is shown on the painting. This one seems not to have been there for very long, but it was large and clearly impressive. It took the form of a grass-covered tiered earthwork of complex design where perhaps boats could pull in. Cradock shows a building at the centre top, but this is not visible in the painting. Interestingly, the later grotto/boathouse was placed on this bank, so possibly this building was its predecessor. Again, it is not clear who was responsible for the earthworks, but whoever designed them was working on a grand scale. It may have been Holt: Kent is not known to have created earthworks like these. The name of Charles Bridgeman has been mentioned as working in a similar mode elsewhere, but in the absence of any documents, we are simply guessing.

The "Fortification" echoes those often found around castles or indeed around whole towns and cities, especially in the Low Countries. They also occurred as garden features in Italy. For example, Villa Manin, near Venice, had something similar, designed in about 1714.

Rocque, in his plan of 1735, shows this little fort in some detail, with a four-oared boat approaching. The painting also shows what looks like the same boat, this time on the canal. A boat was listed in the sale of 1822.

As already mentioned, the changes made about 1720-30 tended towards a softening of the formal landscape in line with fashion, although elaborate man-made features continued to be built. Richard Child was given an earldom in 1732, and it may well be that he envisaged a number of improvements in celebration of his new status.

John Rocque's plan of 1735 must have been made with the idea of recording both what had been achieved and what was still envisaged. Adam Holt was still active at this date, and so was William Kent.

Some observations on Roque's plan.

Gone are:

- The parterres and canal close to house
- The terrace and Banqueting house
- The Bowling Green and the ironwork

Surviving from the old scheme are:

- The groves of the west garden with their buildings, including
- The Green House
- The Kitchen gardens with vineyard, stoves, arbours

Recent features created after c.1725

- The water gardens - shown with embellishments and changes:
- He does not show the earthwork landing place, perhaps removed by this time,
- He does show the amphitheatre.

Rocque shows the wings, which we know were never built, and a large area of ground to the west laid out in winding walks, also never made. However, some other features shown are less certain -

- The Mount in the Great Lake
- The famous image of the island shaped like Great Britain
- The formally shaped end of the main lake and then two large pools.

One hypothesis could be that they are the remains of the more formal arrangement of the waterways initiated in the 1720s, starting with the Octagon Basin at the entrance – perhaps under Holt. Whether this is true or not is impossible to say for certain but, if so, we can see that this area was softened and made more fashionable later.

In the case of the ruined building on the island Mount, this closely resembles Kent's Hermitage for Queen Caroline at Richmond of about 1731, which would make him the obvious candidate for its design. However, it is not marked on any maps except Rocque's. It is possible that it just became overgrown, or that it was dismantled and some of the materials were moved to the new grotto (see below).

While Rocque's map shows us Wanstead in the time of the first Earl, who had been created Earl Tylney in 1732 and who died in 1750, subsequent maps and descriptions tell us about the work of John, second Earl Tylney.

The second Earl was active in making improvements in the 1760s, some of which survive. However, he was abroad more than he was at Wanstead, later retired permanently to Italy, and the gardens and house declined. He died in Naples in 1784 with no issue.

He is principally remembered for having commissioned the building now called The Temple, and the Grotto near the site of the old earthwork landing place. Both features were probably built in the 1760s, when he was in residence. A plan by John Doyley, dated 1815-16, shows us the gardens then, and gives the site of the Grotto and the Temple. It also shows the watercourses and the pleasure gardens near the house, now with all formal features removed.

In 1753, Earl Tylney met William Chambers in Florence, and Chambers designed a small garden temple for the Earl, which was published in his *Treatise on Civil Architecture* of 1759. This was not the least bit like the Temple as built, but showed that the Earl was considering such garden buildings.

The Temple, which still exists, acts as a focus for the avenue from the Serpentine Ponds to the straight avenue. In spite of its classical appearance and its later name – it was first called The Temple in the late 19th century – its original purpose, apart from acting as a pleasing point of view to and from the lake, was as a keeper's cottage and poultry house for the rearing of young birds. It is possible that its architect could be John Vardy (d.1765), who was paid a considerable sum in 1762.

The new Grotto was being constructed in the early 1760s - there are records from this time of materials for the Grotto going to Wanstead. It was in use by 1764, and appears on a plan of 1779. It was later reported to have cost £2000, with much more spent on the decoration.

An 'Inscription for the Grotto in Earl Tilney's Garden at Wanstead' was written in 1764, and in another report of the same year '... the Earl of Halifax, together with the French Ambassador, and twelve or fourteen other Noblemen of distinction, went to view the seat of the Right Hon. Earl Tilney, and the gardens, with the curious grotto at the bottom of them.'

The principal features of the Grotto were -

- a rough facade
- open central arch flanked by a niche and an arch each side
- windows with a hint of the Gothic style.
- a lakeside causeway.
- The facade was decorated with various fragments of carved stone and other artefacts.
- boathouse below
- access from the lake and a space for storage and for the repair and tarring of boats
- domed top-lit chamber above
- An entrance passage from the side
- Steps by the lakeside.
- A lodge for a keeper facing towards the woods and covered with creeping plants.

The building survived relatively intact until a fire of 1884, and was used as a boathouse afterward. Only the ruined shell now remains. However, sketches, descriptions and early photographs partly record its appearance inside and out.

For example, in April 1776, Samuel Curwen noted a 'very odd and uncommon' gate 'made of a scythe, hedge shears, dung forks, reap hooks, &c.'. One came across the grotto, 'formed of earth, stone stumps & c excavated ... into a room about 15 feet in diameter' with a concave roof and 'balcony of glass windows forming a skylight' the roof and walls covered with 'shells, stones petrified substances' ... the flooring of 'small pebbles not bigger than the top of one's thumb of a variety of colours and figures'. Commented on the keeper's apartment, 'a beautiful little room or rooms', one 'lined with irregularly laid stones as if dug out of mines'. There was an octagonal lantern with eight squares of stained glass of a 'beautiful yellow tint', a floor paved in fancy work with black and white pebbles, two convex mirrors and two plates of mirror glass 'very judiciously placed for reflecting the opposite objects', which included ostrich eggs, 'petrified stones', and terracotta and wax figures.

Furniture listed in the 1822 sale catalogue was appropriately rustic, and included two Chinese bamboo chairs. The walls were covered with a variety of shells, crystals and stones and flakes of spar. Alexander Pope, in creating his famous grotto at Twickenham and embellishing it after 1740, had introduced natural curiosities like minerals, shells, fossils and even real stalactites, which set the fashion for such things.

Wanstead Park was opened to the public by the Corporation of London in 1882 and the grotto could be seen for an admission fee of sixpence. Even before the fire, the grotto was partially denuded of its ornament. When the demolition of the house was in progress, and later, 'a good many memorials came into the possession of residents in the villas of the neighbourhood ...' as one report puts it.

After the second Earl Tylney's death in 1784, the estate passed to his sister's son, Sir James Tylney Long, who died in 1794. It then passed to his baby son, who only lived for 11 years, and then to his daughter,

Catherine Tylney Long, in 1805. She was only 18, but destined to be one of the wealthiest women in the country on reaching her majority.

Courted by Duke of Clarence – later William IV - Catherine married William Wellesley Pole, nephew of the Iron Duke of Wellington, who took the names of his bride and became William Pole Tylney Long Wellesley. When they came to Wanstead in 1812, it had been let for some years, and little had been done since Earl Tylney's death. They set about improving the house and garden, and the next year consulted Repton - the most famous landscaper of his day.

Repton's report on Wanstead was, in part, published as a short text in *Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* of 1816, with one watercolour before and after view. This showed Repton's respect for the remaining formal bones of the landscape at Wanstead, and his consideration of how to blend old and new. It seems it was the Wellesleys themselves who wished to retain the old layout, and not sweep it away.

Repton's report was not, as it happens, a 'Red Book' - the volumes bound in red Morocco leather usually presented by Repton to his clients. It appears that the Wellesleys were unenthusiastic about the publicity which Repton craved. In fact, a letter in the Huntington Library shows that he was 'a little mortified' that they did not wish to bind his report as a Red Book to display to visitors. The report was still unbound when the contents of Wanstead were sold in 1822. In the Sale Catalogue it appears as a portfolio of 'Repton's Drawings of Plans for Improving the Grounds at Wanstead House, (15)'. It came up for sale in 2002 at a sale in Sussex (Cubitt), and was bought for Sir Paul Getty. It is now in the Getty Library at Wormsley.

Repton's report is entitled *Plans for the Improvement of the Grounds at Wanstead House, Essex, a seat of W. Long Wellesley Esqr., by H. Repton, 1813*, and there is a note that he visited Wanstead on 8 March 1813, worked on his report at Harestreet on 19 April 1813 and that it was 'finally arranged in Sept 1813'. From all he says it is clear that Repton regarded this as an important commission. This work for a wealthy patron on the outskirts of London might have been the culmination of his career had all his recommendations been accepted and carried out. In fact, they were only partially implemented, perhaps because of the disastrous events which led to the disgrace and bankruptcy of Wellesley.

In front of the house, Repton proposed a new parterre. Once round the Basin, a visitor approaching from the west would hitherto have seen a rather bare expanse of grass with, to either side, the over life size figures of Hercules and Omphale.

Now, Repton described two possible alternatives for the new parterre.

- One was a plan for 'Corbeilles of Roses and flowers mixed'
- The other for 'more formal embroidery Work with box &c.' plus a central pool and fountain, statues in the four quarters, arbours at the corners, and arches of greenery in the centre of each side.

The two options had different planting, and different edging to the beds.

The main pleasure gardens were to be immediately to the east of the house below and a little to the left of the east terrace.

Further features proposed by Repton include a Fruit Wall, Berceau Walk and American Garden.

Repton was disparaging about the Island Gardens where 'there formerly existed regular models of fortifications, with many puerile Conceits not worth restoring or preserving'

He conceded, nevertheless, that the islands 'were now beautifully clothed' [i.e. with trees]. He proposed that a flat bottomed 'self moving ferry boat' would take visitors to the largest island. Rustic bridges would provide links to other islands 'where walks will command the most varied & interesting Scenery of Wood & Water'. Rustic seats of various kinds would be placed in the most interesting places – especially one to give a view of the Grotto. Two pretty grey wash sketches were given to show his ideas for bridges.

Repton's names for the various islands are not used by others: he shows 'Great Island', and Grove Island from which the grotto could be seen. He also mentions the Cherry Island and the Strawberry Island.

In 1803, Repton had published his *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening*, which gives further insights into some of the techniques he used. For example, Repton had a method for furnishing pleasing clumps of trees, which can be seen in practice at Wanstead. He wrote that groups of trees should be planted two or three close together so that their trunks would lean outwards and their branches intermingle. Also, two or more could be planted in the same hole with roots cut so they could be brought nearer together. Also, he often used lower bushes to give a more furnished appearance. These were often thorns, so they would serve as 'nurses' in protecting young trees from animals.

Repton recommended that beeches be planted at Wanstead in the areas close to the lakes. There were also similar plantings of oak – slightly less successful because they grow straighter. The best-known legacy of this period is the so-called "Repton Oak", in Reservoir Wood, which has a girth of 406cm (13foot). It consists of about 10 trees planted together in one hole.

Not all of Repton's proposals were carried out, and some of his ideas were changed, but what was done can be seen in the sequence of maps made by John Doyley.

Doyley was a surveyor, who worked for the Wellesleys and for the parish of Wanstead. His plans range from 1813 to about 1833. These enable us to form something of a picture of what was accepted and what was not and make comparisons with earlier plans and views.

There are two plans dated 1815-16 - two years or so after Repton's report. It is clear from these and later plans that the report was acted on very selectively. For example -

- Little has been done to enhance the far canal. The triple rows of trees along its length are still very fragmented as they were pre-Repton
- No sign of any improvements to the approach to the house,
- However, the parterre has been made, and the terrace behind
- Extensive new planting does seem to have taken place to clothe the banks of the pieces of water, especially near the Grotto and on the edges of the main lake and the water gardens and near the Reservoir Pool

So substantial amounts of work were carried out as a result of Repton's advice in the period 1813-16.

The final episode in the development of the gardens came in 1818 when Lewis Kennedy addressed a volume of proposals to Wellesley – presumably at his request. It contained his ideas for extending the American Gardens.

Lewis Kennedy had a flourishing career as a landscape gardener following Humphry Repton. He presented his proposals bound in green Morocco leather – so Green Books rather than Repton's Red Books. However, his schemes followed a similar format to Repton's.

Kennedy proposed a much larger American Garden which effectively took in the whole of the old pleasure garden, and with a number of new features. This included a trellis "repositoir" and covered walk, the latter to be planted with laburnums and acacias, and hops, jasmines, honeysuckles, China roses and clematis.

Another important proposal was for a Rock Italian Garden. This was to be semicircular in shape, bordered by rockwork and with flower beds in the centre. Kennedy had proposed similar features elsewhere - for instance, at Chiswick Villa in 1814. This would be set out with rocks which would be planted with sedums and wallflowers, and there was to be a rustic alcove to be covered with climbing plants to hang in festoons.

Kennedy also proposed a Swiss Bridge 'to serve as a passage over the water, a little to the right of the Grotto'.

How much of this was done?

There is no change in the plans after 1818, and the area identified as the American Gardens remained as it had been before. There is also no sign of the Italian Garden. Perhaps some work was begun, however - footings were found in the position he proposed for the Swiss Bridge, and Loudon mentions in 1822 that Wanstead's owner had 'formed one of the largest American gardens in the kingdom, from designs by Lewis Kennedy, Esq.'

If Loudon got this right, then there can have been little time to enjoy any new garden features, since the extravagance of William Pole Tylney Long Wellesley brought about the end of the Wanstead estate. The contents of the house were auctioned in 1822, the materials of the house were sold in 1823 and the site cleared by 1825. In 1882 Wanstead Park was acquired by the City of London, but by then only the skeleton of the gardens remained. Other parts of the estate were sold off for housing, and in 1920 part of the land, including the site of Wanstead House, was sold for a golf course.

Most of the images referred to by Dr Jeffery may be seen in "The Gardens of Wanstead", the proceedings of a 1999 study day organised by the London Parks and Gardens Trust, to which Dr Jeffery was a contributor. Copies are available from <http://www.londongardenstrust.org/> at £13.00 plus £0.85 postage and packing.