The Temple Over Time

This exhibition is about the building you are visiting. We look at how it has been used since it was built, around 1760.

The Temple has never had any religious function. It got its name simply because it looks like a Classical temple, buildings very much in fashion when it was first constructed. The present name only seems to have caught on in the second half of the 19th century, and was formalized when the City of London took over Wanstead Park in 1882.

First, let’s see why the Temple came to be built.
Extracts from D’Oyley’s plan of Wanstead 1815-16. The top shows the remains of the double avenue of tress leading from Heronry Pond, and the Grotto and its cottage. Below is a close-up of the Temple. Note a wooden and brick extension on the north wing and, it seems, a brick extension on the south.
A rich young gentleman’s education in the 18th century was rounded off by the Grand Tour. This was to visit Italy (by way of France) to see the great towns and cities of the Renaissance and the remains of ancient Roman civilization. It was the only way to view specific works of art and to meet the aristocratic and fashionably polite society of Europe. The Grand Tour not only provided a liberal education but offered the chance to buy things unavailable at home. Grand Tourists would return with crates of books, pictures and sculpture to be displayed in their houses and gardens.

The young men would cart with them all their possessions and servants, so travel was painfully slow. Most went for at least two years. English critics of the Grand Tour said that far from completing a young gentleman’s education, exposure to vice abroad might well undo him.

The Grand Tour consolidated the fashion for the architecture of classical Rome and the designs of the 16th-century Italian architect Andrea Palladio, himself inspired by classical Roman models. Palladian villas had temple-like fronts and gentlemen returning from the Grand Tour wanted to place copies in their gardens. They were probably also inspired by their great love of the French 17th-century painter Claude, who painted idealized landscapes full of temples and ruins.
3: Other Temples

The Temple is just one example of many similar garden buildings on 18th-century estates. At Stowe near Buckingham Viscount Cobham created one of the great English landscape gardens, where he built nearly 40 temples before he died in 1749. Stowe was much visited and admired.

At Stourhead, Wiltshire, the banker Henry Hoare created an Arcadian landscape, littered with Palladian garden buildings, to show off his learning and good taste. Hoare’s buildings included the Temple of Flora, inspired by the writings of Pliny the Younger and the Temple of Hercules, recalling the Pantheon in Rome.

To the west of London, temples at Chiswick were put up by William Kent, the painter, architect and landscape designer who worked at Wanstead from the 1720s. Gunnersbury Park has a temple which is similar to the portico of the Temple, although it is more finely detailed and in an Ionic style. Its designer could have been either Kent or William Chambers, who also had connections with Wanstead, as we shall see.

Nearer to home was Wanstead Grove. It was demolished in 1889, but two features from the extensive grounds survive behind modern houses in The Avenue. One is a brick- and timber-built temple with an Ionic portico. This dates from the mid-18th century.
4: Design of the Temple

John, 2nd Earl Tylney (1712-1784), succeeded his father in 1750. He made major changes to Wanstead Park, continuing to make the gardens less formal. A connoisseur and collector, he felt he must have a garden temple.

While in Florence in 1753 John met the young architect William Chambers, later famous for Somerset House in London. Chambers designed a small garden temple in the Doric order, which he subsequently dedicated to the Earl in his Treatise of 1759, noting that it was ‘proposed to be executed in his Lordship’s gardens at Wanstead’. This octagonal Classical temple does not seem to have been built, although the design inspired several mausoleums in the south-east.

The present Temple presumably post-dates Chamber’s 1759 book and was probably built along with the Grotto between 1760 and 1762. It is first shown on a 1779 plan of the grounds.

Its architect could be John Vardy (d.1765), a close colleague of William Kent, today mainly known as the designer of Spencer House, overlooking Green Park. A Mr Vardy was paid £25 from Earl Tylney’s bank account at Hoare’s Bank in March 1761.

However, unlike many garden temples, the detailing of the Temple is very plain. It is in a simple ‘Tuscan’ style. As its short Grade II Listing entry states ‘the cornice mouldings [are] replaced by wooden bargeboards’. It might just have been put up by a builder under the 2nd Earl’s direction.
5: The Site

In the early 18th century a double avenue of trees led from what is now Heronry Pond to the Ornamental Water, formed from the 1720s onwards along the River Roding. To the north of the Temple site lay a wooded area called The Grove containing one of the two main viewing mounts, and on its southern slopes a turf amphitheatre was created. It is shown on John Rocque’s 1735 plan of the gardens (displayed upstairs). By 1745 when Rocque surveyed the area again this had developed into an elaborate garden from which a number of yew trees have survived.

The 2nd Earl cut down the eastern half of the avenue of trees and brought out the line of The Grove southwards. At the end of the truncated avenue he had the Temple built, terminating the view from Heronry Pond. An informal path was created leading east to the Ornamental Water and the other new building, the Grotto.
6: Development of the Temple

When first built, the Temple was free-standing, with a portico of four stone columns. It sat on a low brick-built mound, turfed over when new. This concealed the ground floor-room, entered from behind. The upper room was built with a coved ceiling, windows front and back and a handsome stone chimneypiece.

Wings were added shortly after the building was finished using the same type of brick. They appear on Searles’ plan of Wanstead in 1779. The wings must have been added later because exterior pointing was found inside the roof space during repair work in the mid 1990s, showing the building had originally been just one room wide.

Sometime in the 19th century a further extension was added to the south wing, which now houses public lavatories on the ground floor.

From at least 1779 the Temple sat within its own enclosure, incorporating a lawn in front and ground behind, where a pond was formed. This drained away during the last century. Archaeological investigation by the Museum of London uncovered alongside it an 18th-century circular brick structure, probably an ice house.
The Temple closed the view from Heronry Pond. In its upper room a small group could be entertained but we have no documentary evidence it was so used. By contrast, we have several reports of parties that the 2nd Earl threw at the Grotto and along the Ornamental Water.

By 1779 the Temple was shown by Searles as a poultry house. An inventory of the same year suggests that it then housed a menagerie, which we know existed at Wanstead from at least the 1760s. In May 1763 the French astronomer Jérôme Lalande wrote in his journal that he had visited Wanstead and seen the menagerie. Exotic aviary may be a better description; the keeping of exotic birds was then very fashionable. Pheasants, being hardier birds, were housed in coops outside around the pond at the back.

Lord Tylney’s neighbour at Valentines, Sir Charles Raymond, had a menagerie; George Edwards, FRS, visited it in 1770 and noted ‘some curious birds and other animals, from the East Indies’, including a ‘snake-eater’, known today as a secretary bird. Raymond’s business partner, Francis Child of Osterley, had a famous menagerie with 97 different species of bird.

If Lord Tylney’s menagerie was housed at the Temple it may be that the wings when first built were open to the roof, allowing the exotic birds to fly freely. If so, the arrangement could not long have survived the 2nd Earl’s time. From 1813 maps show the Temple as housing a ‘Keeper’s Lodge, Pheasantry etc.’ and by 1822 the building contained several bedrooms.
The 2nd Earl died childless in 1784 and the Wanstead Estate passed to his nephew James Tylney-Long. His daughter Catherine became one of the richest heiresses in the country when she came of age in 1811 and she was courted by royalty among others. Her choice of husband, the Regency rake, William Wellesley-Pole, nephew of the Duke of Wellington, was unfortunate. Together the couple, bearing the faintly ridiculous surname Pole-Tylney-Long-Wellesley, lavished money on the house, the estate, themselves and a huge entourage to the extent that they were forced to sell first the contents and then the very structure of Wanstead House. It was demolished in 1824.

The sale of the contents took place over six weeks in the summer of 1822. It included the contents of the outbuildings, so we know in detail from the sale catalogue what the Temple then contained. It is described as item No.55, Gamekeeper’s Cottage, with 46 different lots. The catalogue shows that there were 3 beds in the building which had a parlour - hung rather curiously with pictures of grass - and a well-stocked kitchen. There were numerous nets and traps, including ‘5 men traps’, plus many guns. Outside, there were 7 dog kennels, several bird coops and ‘the erection of the Pheasantry, with 3 partitions and net over, 48 ft square’.
After Wanstead House was demolished, its grounds were mortgaged and managed by trustees of the Pole-Tylney-Long-Wellesley family. They stripped the park of its assets, chopping down trees, including the avenue in front of the Temple. The grounds, parts let out for grazing, parts for arable farming, were overseen by gamekeepers who continued to live at the Temple.

It is difficult from the ten-yearly census returns from 1841 to identify the building, one of several homes around the Park. The 1861 census lists an uninhabited Grotto cottage directly after the household of the gamekeeper Daniel Cadd, 40, and his family of seven. He was probably living at the Temple. He had moved away by 1871.

The building is shown on the first Ordnance Survey map in 1863 as the Temple but this name does not appear on census returns until 1881, when it is described as a 'shooting box'. This is a lodge used by shooting parties, often with a room to hang game and another to store guns and ammunition. This tallies with the 1822 sale catalogue listing of traps, nets and guns.

In 1881 the Temple housed no less than three families: gamekeeper George Raindle, 26, his wife and their infant son; gamekeeper Sydney Way, 29, and his wife; and Francis Christopher Hill, 26, his wife and three young children plus a governess, a cook and two nursemaids. Hill lived off income from land and dividends and his higher status suggests he resided upstairs while the gamekeepers occupied the ground floor, but living conditions must have been cramped. A year later the City of London took over Wanstead Park.
10: The City Takes Over

In 1882 the Corporation of London opened Wanstead Park to the public following its purchase from the then owner Lord Cowley, part of the Wellesley family. William Puffett, a carpenter born in 1820 in Writtle, was appointed Head Keeper, as he had been ‘for many years in charge of the grounds and the Grotto’. He moved into the Temple, along with his son Robert (born 1853), who had been appointed as one of three Underkeepers. The Epping Forest Committee report of December 1882 stated that ‘the two Puffetts take charge of the Grotto, one official being always to be inside whilst it is open. The small charge [6d or 2½p] made for admission will, we anticipate, nearly, if not quite, pay their wages.’

Unfortunately, the Grotto burnt down in November 1884. It was decided to leave it as a picturesque ruin and William Puffett was offered the tenancy of the newly-built Refreshment Chalet (see next frame).

The Committee kept one room within the Temple for its own use on its regular visits to the Forest. This is the present-day Story Room upstairs. Once a month the members would expect dinner. Robert Puffett was instructed by the Superintendent to shoot ducks for the meal, which was cooked by his wife, and Puffett and George Paveley, the resident staff, would serve at table dressed in their white summer uniforms. One member agonised about tipping the men but was told by the Superintendent that he shouldn’t as the keepers got the leftovers. The morning after Puffett would clean the glasses and silverware, later visiting local shops to pay the bills. By the 1930s the dinner was of seven courses and included fish delivered from Billingsgate Market.
In 1883 the Superintendent employed John Egan to construct a large refreshment hut just to the west of the Temple enclosure. It cost £1,000 and was originally known as the Swiss Chalet. The first tenant was William Puffett, part of whose duties was to provide refreshments for the early morning bathers at Heronry Pond. He continued in post until old age forced him to retire in 1901.

The Chalet features in many Edwardian postcards of Wanstead Park and was very popular. Next to it was a makeshift lavatory for ladies, which became rather unsavoury over the years. Indeed, the rudimentary toilet provision in the Park was an increasing source of complaint and led in 1957 to the construction of public toilets in the southern wing of the Temple.

In April 1917 the proprietor Mr Chapman asked to close the Chalet as the manager Henry Tessier had been sent to the Front and his only trade was unruly boys who broke the windows. The Committee agreed but Chapman struggled on until September, when the building was bombed.

The Chalet was bombed again during World War Two, in October 1940. It was patched up, given a fresh coat of green paint and continued in business. Despite surviving bombing, the Chalet burnt down on 23 November 1948. Messrs Greeve of Kensal Rise were given a licence to trade in a temporary building, wooden-framed with a corrugated iron roof, painted red. Greeves gave this up after they were asked to pay rates, and the building and the Chalet ruins were removed during 1953.
12: A Home for Keepers

From 1882 until 1960, when lodges were built alongside, the Temple’s main function was to house Forest Keepers and their families. The building was connected to the new sewer under Wanstead Park in 1888 and during 1890 was fully repaired, with new floorboards laid, the kitchen and scullery whitewashed and the roof made good. There are however frequent references to roof repairs in the diaries kept by Keepers in the years before World War One.

Two families generally lived at the Temple. One lived in two rooms downstairs, while the other had a room downstairs and a bedroom above (now the Andromeda room), reached by what was then the only staircase within the building.

Outside there were stables, a tool shed, a duck pond and duck shed, as well as a ferret hutch for frequent ratting parties.

Keepers entered the building from behind. Their address was ‘Keepers’ Cottages’, not the Temple. The front lawn and portico were out of bounds. The Committee room in the south wing could be accessed externally via a short flight of steps leading to a central door (both now removed).

There was a large flag post next to the old mounting block in front of the portico and in the interwar period it was flanked by two field guns.

The Temple was never open to the public, and was not particularly visible, shrouded as the front was in bushes, with trees around the enclosure.
13: World War One

During the First World War London became the first city to suffer aerial bombardment and Wanstead was not spared.

Zeppelin raids saw many bombs falling on Wanstead Flats but it was not until the German military switched to newly developed planes to drop bombs that Wanstead Park was affected. Six bombs fell there on 4 September 1917. One struck the ridge of Temple, causing considerable damage to the building and its contents, but no one was hurt. Another fell in the wood near the Chalet whose windows were broken.

The wife of William Brooke complained to the Superintendent that her bedroom was leaking badly but he replied that as Brooke had left the service she was living rent-free. The Temple was however repaired. The Committee considered laying linoleum on the floor of its meeting room but the Chairman decided that was too expensive.

Fragments of the bomb which hit the Temple were displayed here after the War. In 1940 the widow of William Mundy, who helped repair the building, donated the nose of the bomb which her husband had found and kept as a memento.
14: World War Two

Wanstead Park came under attack again during World War Two. The resident keepers had help from the Barrage Balloon unit stationed just inside the Warren Gate to make a temporary air raid shelter in the mount nearest the Temple.

During the Blitz, in October 1940, both the Temple and the Chalet were hit by incendiary bombs. Temporary repairs were made to the Committee Room. This was eventually paid for by the War Damage Commission.

In 1942 the local Home Guard asked to use the Committee Room for its exercises within the Park. This was agreed even though relations between the Superintendent and the Home Guard had been strained. Keepers had been enrolled in the Home Guard but, exasperated by the lack of coordination between the various Home Guard units covering the Forest, the Superintendent had told all the Keepers to resign.

The Temple came under renewed attack from V1 flying bombs in 1944. On July 8 tiles on the roof were blown off, plaster was displaced and the ceiling came down. The windows were blown in during October.

On 5 Jan 1945 a V2 rocket fell by the Glade, flattening the mount with the shelter, and again causing damage to the Temple. The main roof was stripped bare, all the glass was broken and the remaining plaster came down, while the stores outside were wrecked. The keepers were forced to live elsewhere while it was repaired.
The Temple’s time as a domestic building ended when the Keepers and their families finally moved into new lodges built at a right angle to the building at the end of the 1950s. Plans for these had been afoot throughout that decade.

The lower part of the building was then used as offices for Forest staff. The main room downstairs was partitioned into two until the mid-1990s.

Upstairs, the Committee still made use of its room, which was otherwise used to store archives.

By the 1950s the Committee’s monthly dinners had become less frequent Venison Suppers, again prepared and served by the Keepers. These have continued on an annual basis until recently. Much less often the Temple has served over the years as one of the southern polling stations within Epping Forest for elections of Verderers.
16: 1990s Overhaul

In 1990 an extensive landscape survey of Wanstead Park by Debois recommended reinstating the original view of the Temple at the end of a double avenue of trees. Rows of sweet chestnut trees were subsequently planted. Meanwhile the City Surveyors, responsible for the fabric of the Temple, undertook a condition survey in 1992, prior to a major overhaul. This repair and refurbishment work was completed in May 1997.

More authentic, glazed black pantiles were placed on the roof, small windows in the front recesses were bricked up and the steps leading to the Committee room were removed, as was the flag post. Paint was stripped off the brickwork which was repointed. Internally, a new wooden staircase was inserted in the southern wing, now the public stairs, and the entrance hall was restored as close as possible to its 18th-century appearance.

Afterwards, work started on the garden with the aim of opening up the view of the Temple. The shrubs and trees masking the front of the building were removed over time. In 2000 the picket fence was replaced by a metal one. In 2002 the rhododendrons that had surrounded the enclosure were grubbed up and holly was planted alongside the fence. However, this failed to take and was removed by 2004. Within the enclosure is now a good patch of acid grassland where harebells bloom.
17: Public Opening

The repair of the Temple - and its greater presence - stimulated plans to open the building to the public. Starting with Open House weekend in 1996, by 2006 the Temple was open to the public one weekend in four, with craft activities and guided walks offered.

The cleared garden became the venue from 2000 for the annual Music In the Park event and then also for summer theatre performances as well. To mark the 125th anniversary of Wanstead Park in 2007 a Regency style entertainment called Pleasure Gardens was arranged.

From April 2008, when the roof was retiled once more, the Temple has been opened every weekend and Bank Holiday with a programme of events and temporary exhibitions, such as this one.

As part of the public consultation in early 2015 plans were unveiled for the Temple to become the main visitor hub for Wanstead Park. Its future is secure.