

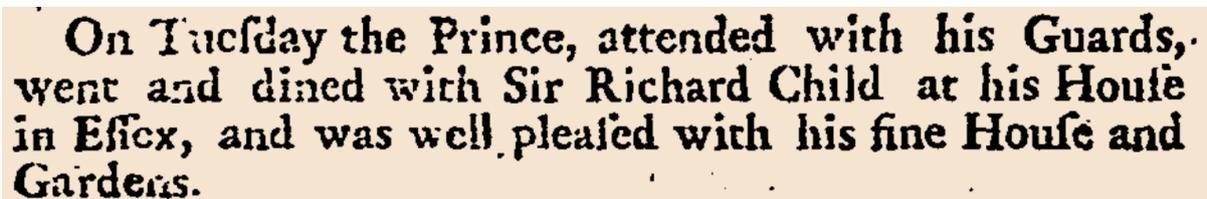
# The Architecture of Wanstead House

## By Ray Weekes

### Part 1 – Origins

Sometime in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century the owner of the Wanstead Manor and its estate, Sir Richard Child, decided to pull down the old medieval manor house that had stood in the grounds for many hundreds of years and build a new large stately mansion, presumably to demonstrate his wealth and status. The result was Wanstead House, described as one of the largest and noblest country houses in England, which stood for just over a hundred years before being completely demolished in 1823/4.

We don't know the exact dates of the construction of the house. The date usually given is 1715 which is when the architect Colen Campbell first published various drawings of the design. But it must have taken a few years to build a house of that size and we know that it was finished by 1722 when the Scott John Macky visited the house and wrote about a building that was internally and externally complete. As part of my research, I came across a newspaper reference for July 1717 (Fig 1) that states that the Prince (i.e. the Prince of Wales, the future King George II) visited Wanstead House. The implication being that enough of the new house was complete by then to entertain royalty. Campbell is generally thought to have started work on the design of Wanstead in 1713 and we know that he was working on other commissions in 1717. So, this puts the dates for the design and construction of Wanstead House to around 1713-17.



**On Tuesday the Prince, attended with his Guards, went and dined with Sir Richard Child at his House in Essex, and was well pleased with his fine House and Gardens.**

*Figure 1 - Saturday Weekly Journal or Saturday's Post (London), 20<sup>th</sup> July 1717.*

Wanstead House was the first country house in England to be built in the Palladian style, but this raises the interesting question of why? The prevailing architectural style at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was English Baroque, that is, a style that combined classical forms with complex compositions creating lots of movement, sculptural qualities, opulent decoration and visual drama. The high point of English Baroque came at the turn of the century when several large Baroque country houses were started, such as William Talman's Chatsworth (begun 1687), Vanbrugh's Castle Howard (begun 1700) and Blenheim also by Vanbrugh (begun 1705). All built, in contrast to Wanstead, by landed gentry or aristocratic families.

Why Richard Child decided to build Wanstead as a Palladian style house we don't know although it's possible to surmise. Firstly, the 18<sup>th</sup> century saw some fundamental changes in Britain. Increasing wealth and expanding trade lead to the beginning of a 'commercial and consumer' society, whilst Britain was becoming a significant military power following success in wars with France and Spain. Against this background, it was felt by many commentators that Britain should have her own national architectural identity. The Baroque style being associated with the European Catholic

Counter-reformation and therefore inappropriate to a British independent protestant nation. No specific style was mentioned, but the last time England had a unique architectural style was in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century under the architect Inigo Jones. His buildings, such as Queens House Greenwich (1616-35) and the Banqueting House in Whitehall (1619-22), were in the Italian Renaissance style but strongly influenced by Palladio.

Secondly, by the early part of the century it became clear that, with the demise of the Stuart Queen Anne (reigned 1702-14), the House of Hanover was going to provide the next British monarch (George I reigned 1714-27). Members of the English aristocracy and gentry travelled to Hanover to ingratiate themselves with the new rulers where they discovered that the Hanoverians were related to Venetian aristocracy and that Palladianism was their preferred style of court architecture. One architectural historian, Barbara Arciszewska, has explicitly suggested that Richard Child commissioned a Palladian style house as an attempt to enhance his status at court given his desire for a peerage, which he achieved in 1718 as Viscount Castlemaine. But there is no evidence that Child went on a grand tour to acquire an understanding of the classical world.

Another mystery is how and why Richard Child commissioned the Scottish architect Colen Campbell to design Wanstead House, although it was probably the result of a complex social network. The architect William Talman, who had designed Chatsworth, had already been working at Wanstead where he designed the greenhouse, but he was overlooked in favour of Campbell who was only recently down from Scotland and relatively unknown with only one major building to his name, Shawfield Mansion in Glasgow built in 1712. This Palladian house was built for the merchant trader and fellow clan member Donald Campbell, who had extensive business relationships in London. In particular, he had links with one William Benson (1682-1754) an architectural patron and subsequent Whig MP who had visited the Hanoverian Court around 1704-06 where he was commissioned to create a large fountain for the gardens in one of the summer palaces. Back in England Benson seems to have been an early proponent of Palladian architecture and built Wilbury House in Wiltshire (1708-10), regarded as one of the first real Palladian revival villas. Later in life, Campbell and Benson became professional associates in the Office of Works which oversaw the maintenance of government and royal buildings. Benson, therefore, may have been influential in finding clients, such as Child, for Campbell. Yet another link may have been from another MP John Aislabie, (1670–1742) who had business connections with Benson. Aislabie was one of the Commissioners under the 1711 Act for Building Fifty New Churches, to which Campbell had submitted some architectural designs in 1712, and Aislabie later commissioned Campbell to work on various projects in Yorkshire.

Colen Campbell came to prominence in 1715 with the publication of *Vitruvius Britannicus* (The British Vitruvius), a book published under his name and that gave him a platform from which to advance his architectural career. The book contained orthographic drawings of buildings by British architects that included two designs for Wanstead House, although not exactly as finally built. A third modified but unexecuted design was published in 1725. Campbell seems to have had a good knowledge of the Palladian style. In addition to his travels abroad, this may have come from one of his architectural tutors, the Scottish architect James Smith (c.1645-1731). Analysis of Campbell's drawings has shown that many of his designs were derived or copied from Smith's.

In part 2 I look at the architectural features of Wanstead House itself.

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