

The Architecture of Wanstead House

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Part 2 – Architectural Features

Our understanding of what was built at Wanstead comes from three sources. Firstly, the various drawings and engravings published during the 18th century throughout the life of the building (e.g. Fig1). The issue here is that generally, they are too distant to show the details of architectural forms. Most drawings show the front façade only with little real perspective. The major characteristics that appealed to an artist were its large single block mass with large dramatic features, its white colour, and its landscaped setting.



Figure 1 - Wanstead House watercolour, undated, (Richard Westall 1765–1836, Yale Centre for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection)

Secondly, are the drawings published in April 1715 by the architect Colen Campbell in *Vitruvius Britannicus*, specifically the second design in the book known as Wanstead II (Fig2). The drawings were probably done about 1713/14 but certain design changes were done before the building was structurally complete, so the drawings are not exactly as built. In particular, the cupola shown on the roof was not created. Thirdly there are a few written descriptions of the house from visitors. But these also lack detail and are mainly concerned with the interiors.

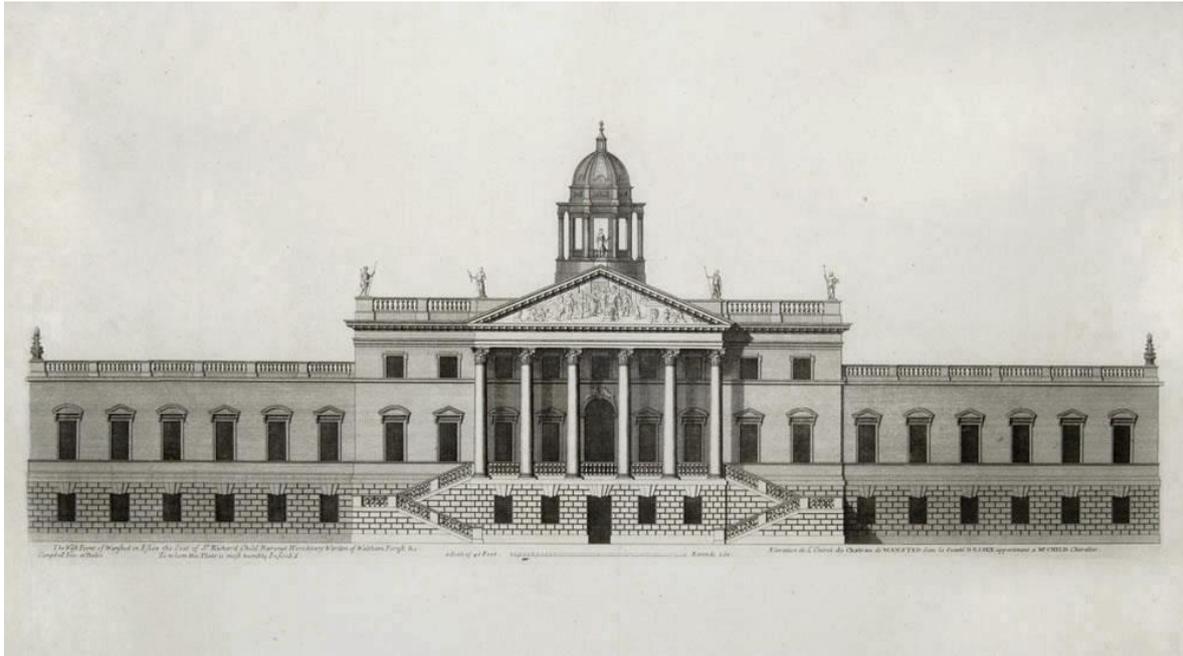


Figure 2 - Wanstead House II from *Vitruvius Britannicus*, 1715, plates 24-25.

Wanstead House was comprised of three large rectangular blocks, creating a tripartite elevation. The central block projected slightly forward and was flanked by two lower wings. There were two main storeys across both the central block and the two wings, a ground floor (known in the 18th century as ‘the rustic’), and a first floor *piano nobile* some 15ft high to afford views of the gardens from the state apartments. In addition, there was a small second-floor attic storey in the central block. The 1822 Sale Catalogue also refers to a basement below ground level. The first floor *piano nobile* had high rectangular windows with alternating segmental and triangular pediments whilst the ground floor windows were rectangular, each topped by flat-arched voussoirs (wedge-shaped stones) with a massive keystone.

A long classical balustrade defined the horizontal roofline disguising the slope of the roof and the chimneys behind. There is no evidence that the rooftop sculptures shown in the *Vitruvius Britannicus* drawing were ever erected. With the length of the whole block about 260ft, the overall impression is one of horizontality rather than verticality. The building was built of brick but cased in white Portland stone, the upper part smooth ashlar (finely dressed stone), the lower part rusticated (textured by joints) to give the effect of strength and weight.

The house was approached from the west side where fronting the central block was a giant pedimented portico, the most prominent feature of the façade emphasising the centrality of the composition. The portico sat on a ground floor plinth and rose from the first floor *piano nobile* to form the large triangular pediment. What made the Wanstead portico so monumental was firstly its enormous size in relation to the façade, and secondly that the high ridge of the pediment rose above and over the hall and saloon of the house as a double-pitched roof at right angles to the front.

The portico had six free-standing (hexastyle) giant order (more than one storey) Corinthian columns across the front with an additional column at each side. The gap between the columns being wider in the centre to view the entrance doorway. The portico could be reached from the sides by an exterior double flighted staircase (known as a *perron*), in the form of a ‘dog-leg’ with landing and balustrades (Fig3), the balustrades on the staircase and on the portico floor matching those on the roofline. This was in marked contrast to earlier English Baroque houses where the state apartments

were on the ground floor without the need for a grand entrance staircase. Someone like Richard Child would have expected those of some social standing to enter his house by the portico, although there was a separate private family doorway at ground level below. The portico was open at the sides but covered to protect from the weather, although it probably made the interior somewhat dark and not best suited to an English climate.



Figure 3 - Wanstead House, 1807, watercolour, (Thomas Streatfield 1777–1848, Yale Centre for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection)

Sculpture in the upper triangular part of the portico pediment (the tympanum) was believed to be the arms of Child's Irish Peerage of 1731 as Earl Tynney of Castlemaine. The cornice or decorative moulding that surrounds tympanum was made up of small blocks called dentils (like small teeth).

The east side façade facing the gardens was similar to the west façade except that the projecting portico was replaced by a flat temple style front with Corinthian flat pilasters rather than round columns (Fig4). Also, the *piano nobile* windows were slightly different being surrounded by a moulded stone frame with square blocks placed at intervals, an architectural feature known as a 'Gibbs Surround'.

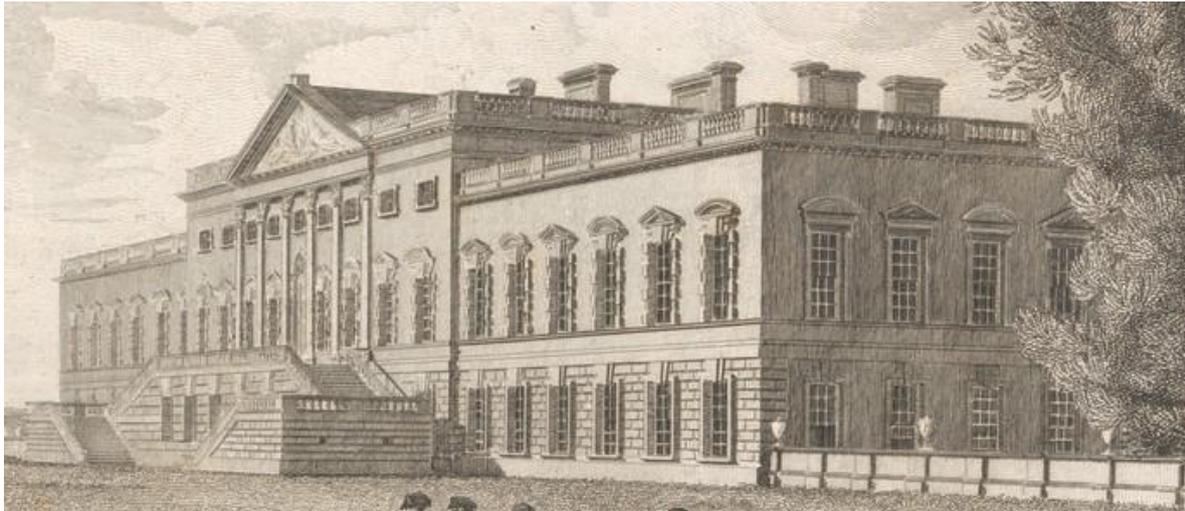


Figure 4 – Enlargement of Wanstead House East Side engraving 1781 (Wilson Lowry after George Robertson, Yale Centre for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection)

There appears to have been no substantial changes to the exterior over the next 100 years, apart from the staircase on the east garden front which was removed in later years. A plan by Campbell shown in the 1725 third edition of *Vitruvius Britannicus* to add towers to the wings and a 1730s plan to add some quadrant colonnades were never proceeded with.

In part 3 I look at the design sources.

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