

# The Architecture of Wanstead House

## By Ray Weekes

### Part 3 – Design Sources

Wanstead House was commissioned in a period, starting at the turn of the century, when wealthy men were building large country houses and it is within this context that Wanstead needs to be seen. The three key large country houses built before Wanstead, Blenheim, Chatsworth, and Castle Howard were all in the English Baroque style and all were featured in the first edition of Campbell's *Vitruvius Britannicus*. Campbell respected and admired Vanbrugh and included his designs in all three editions. The Wanstead profile clearly owes something to the garden front facade at Vanbrugh's Castle Howard but conceived in Palladian terms. In Campbell's unexecuted third design for Wanstead (1725) he added flanking towers and if the central cupola of the original design had been retained then the derivation from the Castle Howard garden front would have been almost complete (Fig1/2/3). The architectural historian Rudolf Wittkower wrote that an English 18<sup>th</sup>-century building should be seen from a distance like a picture rather than be judged for its sculptural values and Wanstead, in comparison to Castle Howard, provides an example of this.

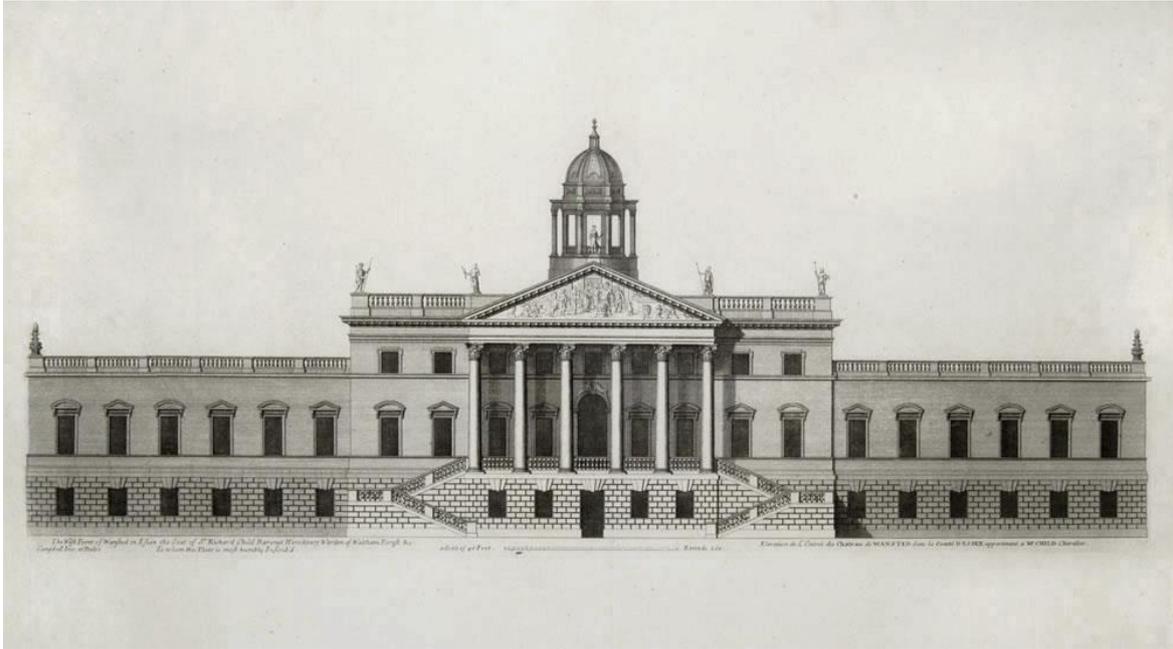


Figure 1 - Wanstead House II from Vitruvius Britannicus, 1715, plates 24-25.



Figure 2 - Wanstead House III west elevation, from Vitruvius Britannicus 1725, plates 39-40.

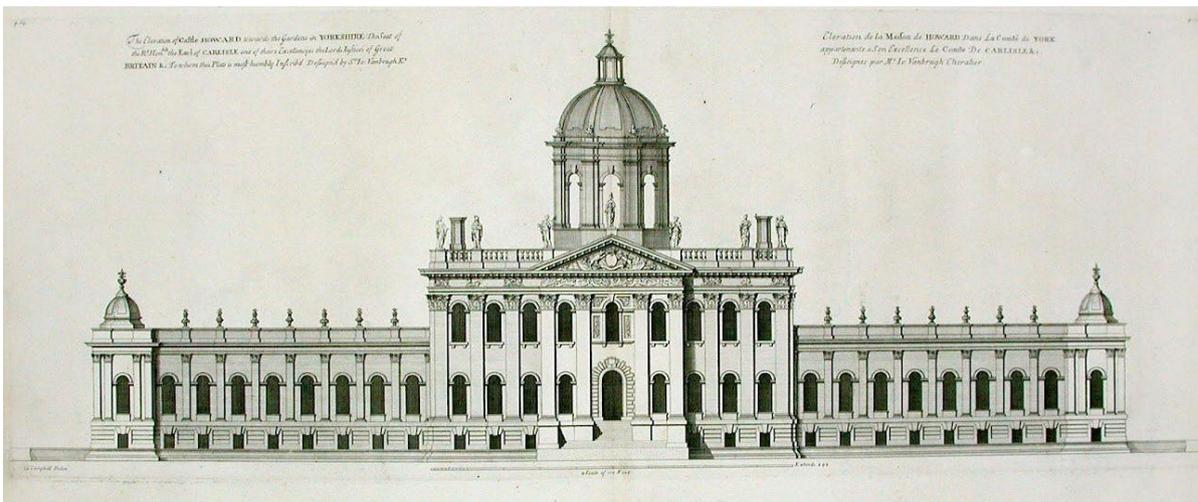


Figure 3 - Castle Howard, Garden Front elevation by John Vanbrugh, from Vitruvius Britannicus 1715, plates 69-70

Thus, Wanstead can be seen as, on the one hand looking back to these great country houses, but then moving on to something more, that is, to a Palladian style. But what do we mean by that? What is it about the building that leads us to describe the house as being based on the Palladian style, that is after the famous architect Andrea Palladio (1508-80) who built many country villas, townhouses and churches in the Italian Veneto in the second half of 16<sup>th</sup> century?

One approach to help us understand this issue is to ask three questions. Firstly, was Wanstead House based upon any previous design by Palladio? For example, Palladio's Villa Rotunda was used in England as the basis for both Campbell's Mereworth Castle (1723) and Burlington's Chiswick House (1729). The direct answer appears to be no, and Palladio never built anything as large as Wanstead House. However, the main central block of Wanstead can be compared to the core of many of Palladio's villas. Taking the Villa Foscari (1560, also known as Villa Malcontenta) as a specific example (Figs 4 & 5), both comprise a rectangular block with a similar structural configuration comprising three levels, a ground floor, a dominant second floor *piano nobile* containing the principal rooms, and a third-floor mezzanine or implied attic story. In both blocks, the base acts as a plinth on which stands the rest of the house accessed by a large dominant portico reached by external stairs.

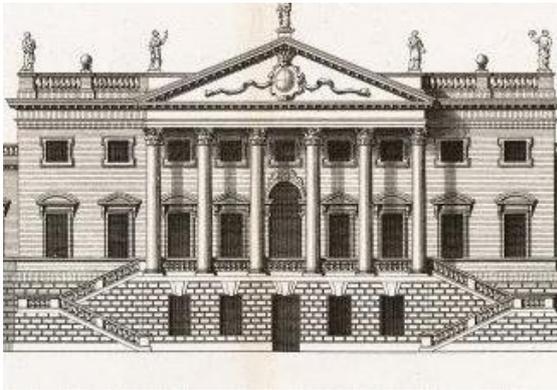


Figure 4 - Wanstead House Central Block, from Vitruvius Britannicus 1725, plates 24-25



Figure 5 – Palladio's Villa Foscari or Malcontenta (1560) (Wikimedia, Hans A. Rosbach, 2007)

The second question is, did Wanstead use specific features or forms associated with Palladio? The giant portico was perhaps the house's most classical feature. Stretching up through the house from front to back it has been described as giving the impression of 'an entire Roman temple embedded in the centre of the house' (fig6).



Figure 6 – Enlargement of a Wanstead House engraving showing portico ridge rising through the building (James Fittler, after George Robertson, 1781, Yale Centre for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection)

The columns and capital in the Wanstead portico were of the Corinthian order which, together with modillions and dentils in the pediment, presents something very characteristic of Roman temple monuments, such as the portico fronting the Pantheon in Rome. The Corinthian order wasn't used much by the ancient Greeks and Palladio himself preferred the Doric and Ionic orders. Being more complex, ostentatious and refined the Corinthian order is considered higher in the architectural hierarchy, reflecting its imperial associations, and a visible metaphor for the status and character of an owner like Child. Palladio thought that architecture should enhance the occupant's dignity and that architectural forms should clearly express their function. The portico clearly did both at Wanstead, such as showing precisely where the entrance is. However, Palladio's use of a classical temple front, as a signature architectural form on his domestic villas was something of a misunderstanding by him of the ancient world. In classical times it was only used for temples.

The third question is to consider the whole design and the way that simplicity and proportion are combined to produce something expressing grandeur and a pleasing visual experience. It was the Roman writer Vitruvius who said that a man's body is proportioned according to geometry and mathematics and that those proportions, when applied to architecture, will produce perfect buildings. Palladio's buildings capture those ideas in proportions and ensure all parts of a building are in harmony with one another. At Wanstead the length of the main central block was one 100 feet, whilst the height was 50 feet, a ratio of 2:1. Whilst each of the two wings was 80 feet long and 40 feet high, again the same ratio of 2:1 (Fig7). These same proportions can be found in many of Palladio's buildings.

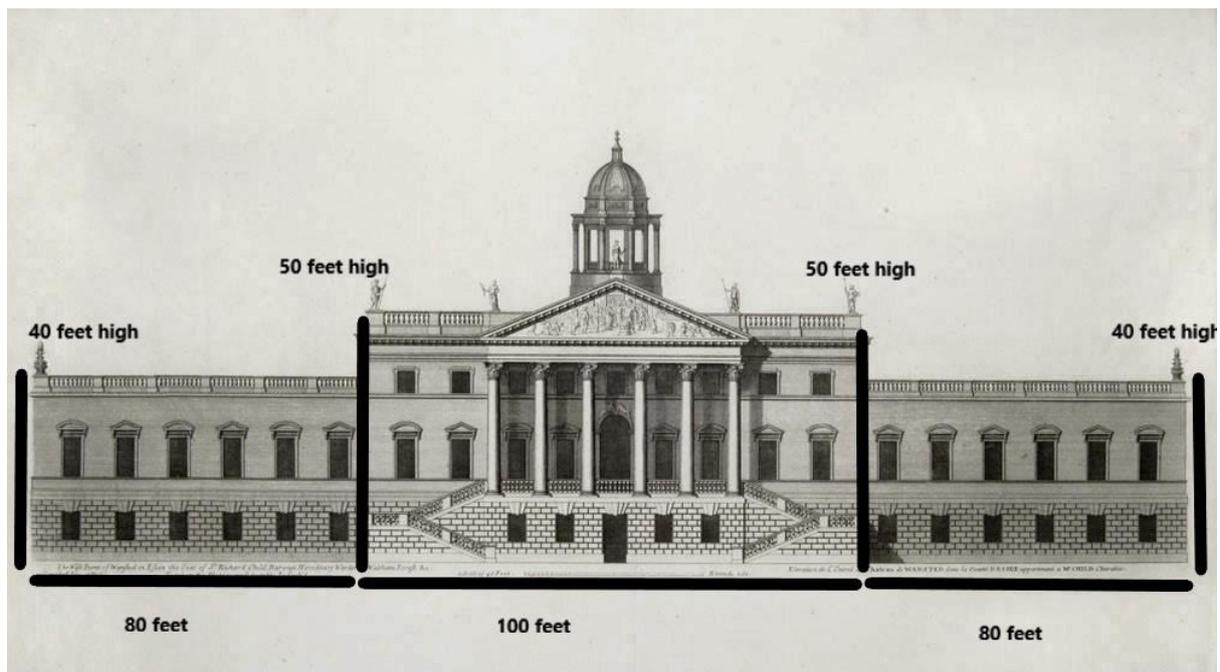


Figure 7 - Wanstead House II from *Vitruvius Britannicus*, 1715, plates 24-25.

As I mentioned in my introduction the search for a British architectural identity led many commentators to look back to the works of Inigo Jones who was active in the early half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Jones was much admired at this time and there is no doubt that Campbell regarded his works as being of major importance and influence. In the first edition of *Vitruvius Britannicus* Campbell stressed the superiority of 'the Famous Inigo Jones', calling him the 'great master' who's work equalled that of Palladio, but with 'an addition of beauty and majesty'.

A characteristic of Jones's later domestic work was for a restrained astylar architecture (lacking columns or pilasters) rather than a conspicuous use of orders. This comes through in Wanstead where the overriding aesthetic in the two rectangular wings is one of simple sober dignity and where architectural ornament has been reduced to a minimum, just a series of windows as isolated elements on a blank wall. The horizontal emphasis is accentuated by the straight skyline and string course, whilst the dominant ground floor is rusticated. This is very similar to Jones's austere Queen's House Greenwich with its simple unadorned astylar façade and similar skyline, string course and rustication (figs 8 & 9). The triple keystone voussoirs in the Wanstead ground floor windows was also a motif that Jones had used previously at Queen's House. All of these items show that many aspects of Campbell's work at Wanstead should be seen as a Jonesian revival rather than following Palladio per se.

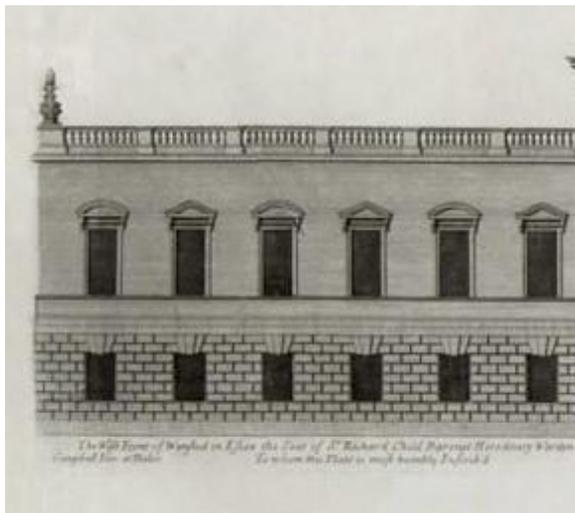


Figure 8 - Wanstead House west elevation north wing, from *Vitruvius Britannicus*, plates 24-25



Figure 9 - Queen's House, north side, Greenwich, by Inigo Jones (1616 – 1635)

In the last part I look at the interior design and Wanstead's subsequent influence.

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