

# The Architecture of Wanstead House

## By Ray Weekes

### Part 4 – Interior and Influences

The interior layout at Wanstead House reflected Palladio's use of underlying grids and symmetry combined with contemporary country house designs. The main first floor *piano nobile* consisted of about 20 rooms, comprising dining rooms, drawing rooms, anterooms, bedrooms, chapel and library (later converted to ballroom). At the centre of the building was a large entrance hall and saloon enabling someone to pass through from one side of the building to the other. The lesser rooms on either side of the centre being laid out in a symmetrical fashion (Fig1). This concurs with Palladio who said that:

“Rooms must be distributed at either side of the entrance and the hall, and one must ensure that those on the right correspond and are equal to those on the left...”.

For large houses there was a fashion for staterooms amongst the aristocracy and these were seen at great houses like Castle Howard and Blenheim. In Wanstead's case 'apartments of state' meant rooms to impress visitors rather than reserved for royal guests, a better description might be 'parade rooms'. These are laid out in a style commonly known as 'double-pile', with two piles of rooms running lengthwise. Along both lateral sides of the house is an *enfilade*, an alignment of room doors so that it provides a vista from one end of the building to the other. This again is in line with Palladio who wrote about doors:

“they should also face each other so that someone standing in one part of the house is able to see across to the other...”.

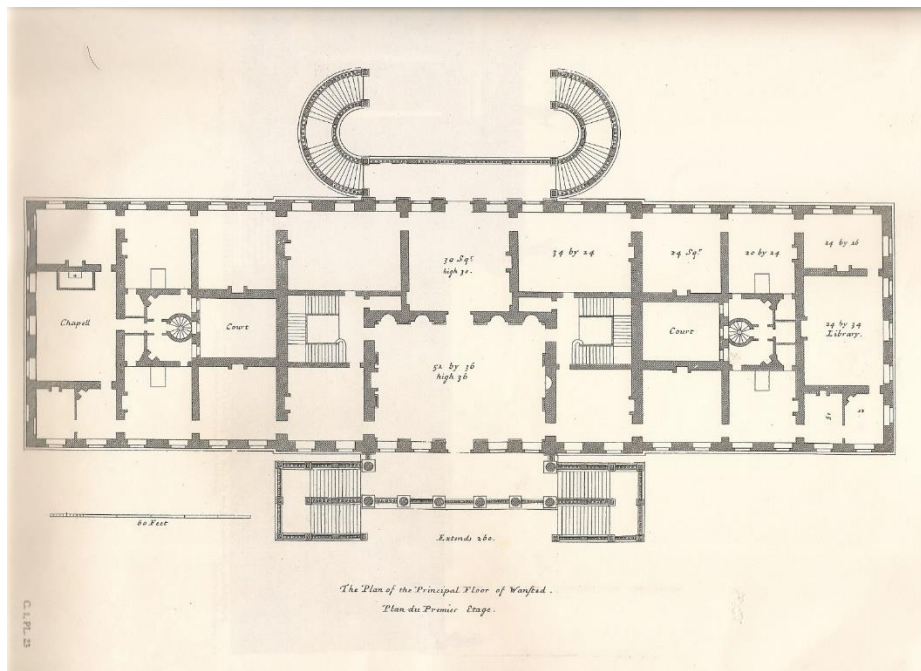


Figure 1 - Wanstead House room plan of piano nobile, from Vitruvius Britannicus (1715), plate 23

Palladio explained how different types of rooms that are well-proportioned turn out better. One type is the cube that corresponds to the Wanstead Saloon, a 30-foot cube. Another type matches the Great Hall which at 36-feet wide, 51-feet long, and 36-feet high corresponds to Palladio's rule that the length will equal the diagonal of the square, 51-feet being the diagonal length of a 36-foot square.

In addition to the first floor *piano nobile*, there was a ground floor consisting of symmetrical suites of 4 apartments, 2 in each wing, whilst below ground was a basement containing kitchen, storerooms and cellars. The attic story also had rooms, so in total the house would have had more than 70 rooms with up to 20 bedrooms. Interestingly the staircases were tucked away rather than being made into an architectural feature as in many grand houses.

Visitors would enter the house from the portico into the grand entrance hall that was the same height as the external portico. Inside were Corinthian pilasters similar in style and size to the external portico columns. Thus, architecturally the hall acted as transition space from the external to the internal.

In terms of interior decoration, the main criteria for a large house like Wanstead was to impress upon the visitor a sense of the owner's rank and status. Palladio provided no particular guidance and the combination of Corinthian pilasters and rather old-fashioned panelling scheme in Campbell's design for the Great Hall suggests a more Baroque style. It also suggests that Campbell was not a great designer of interiors. Indeed, William Kent was commissioned in the 1720s to decorate the interior including several wall and ceiling paintings.

Because Wanstead has a Palladian aesthetic there is a tendency to group it as part of the English neo-Palladianism style that evolved later in the 18th century under architects like Burlington. This style adopted a more literary approach to ancient buildings and came to be associated with a number of Palladian forms or motifs, such as the Venetian window, and rusticated window and door frames. In fact, none of these forms owe their origin directly to Palladio, and were used by him very sparingly. Their use in the Wanstead designs was extremely limited and perhaps explains why one historian, James Ackerman, describes Campbell's Palladianism as "rather simplistic".

Nevertheless, the Wanstead designs from *Vitruvius Britannicus* and the built house were to be very influential as the style became fashionable. The major Palladian feature of Wanstead, the giant portico dominating the façade, meant that the grand freestanding portico became a key ingredient for country houses. Later in the 1730s several large country houses were built based directly on copying a specific Wanstead design, for example, Wentworth Woodhouse in Yorkshire (1733) by Henry Flitcroft, based on the design of Wanstead as-built (Fig2), and Prior Park Bath (1735-43) by John Wood the Elder (Fig3), based on the design of the first but unexecuted design of Wanstead as shown in *Vitruvius Britannicus*. The Wanstead influence even extended abroad where it is said that the west façade of the Berlin Opera House of 1741, by the Prussian architect Knobelsdorff, was derived from Campbell's design for Wanstead (Fig4).



Figure 2 - Wentworth Woodhouse (1733) by Henry Flitcroft, based on the design of Wanstead House as-built (from *A Complete History of the County of York* by Thomas Allen 1828-30)

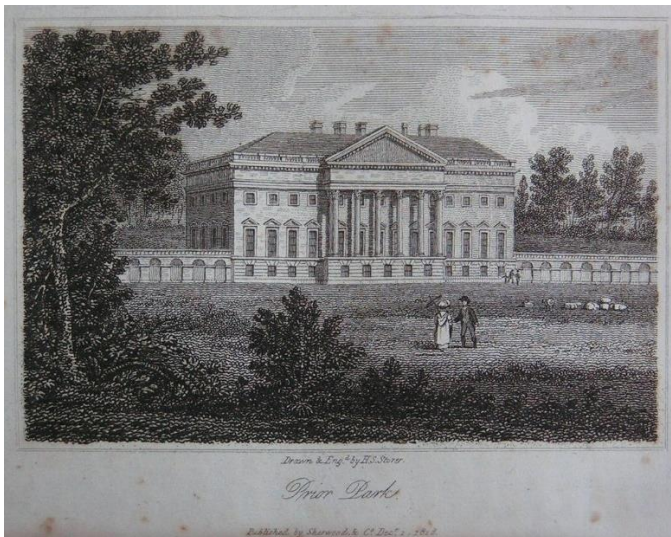


Figure 3 – Prior Park Bath (1735-43) by John Wood the Elder, based on design of Wanstead I in *Vitruvius Britannicus* 1715 (Print by H S Storer published 1818 by Sherwood & Co)

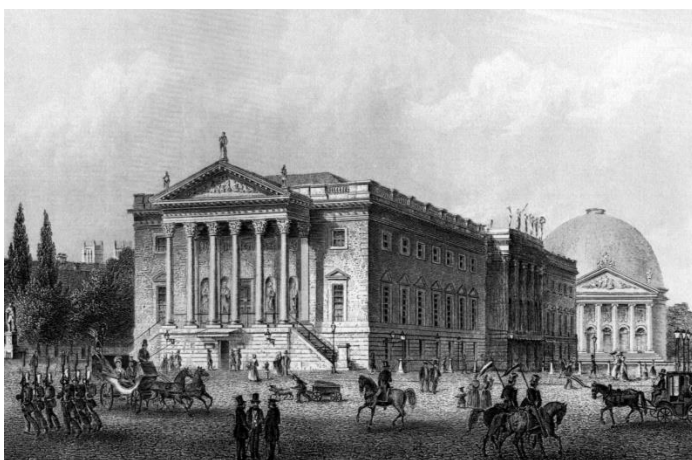


Figure 4 – Berlin Opera House of 1741 (Wikimedia, 1850, Unknown source, Public Domain)