



FESTIVAL of BRITISH ARCHAEOLOGY

14th to 29th July 2012

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF WANSTEAD PARK

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Wanstead Parklands
at**

The Temple, Wanstead Park

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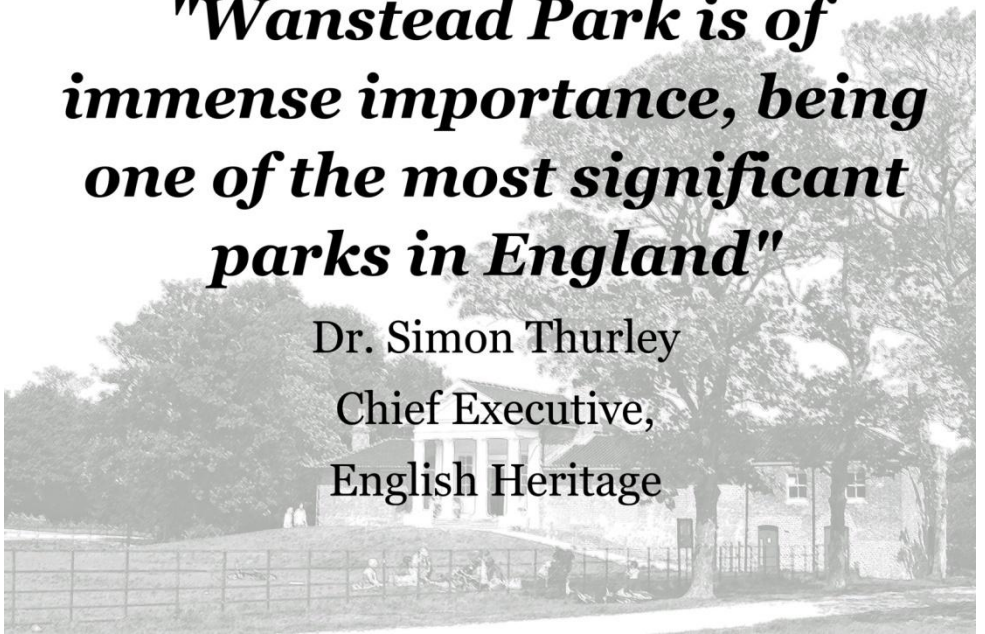


Council for British
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www.britarch.ac.uk

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***"Wanstead Park is of
immense importance, being
one of the most significant
parks in England"***

Dr. Simon Thurley
Chief Executive,
English Heritage





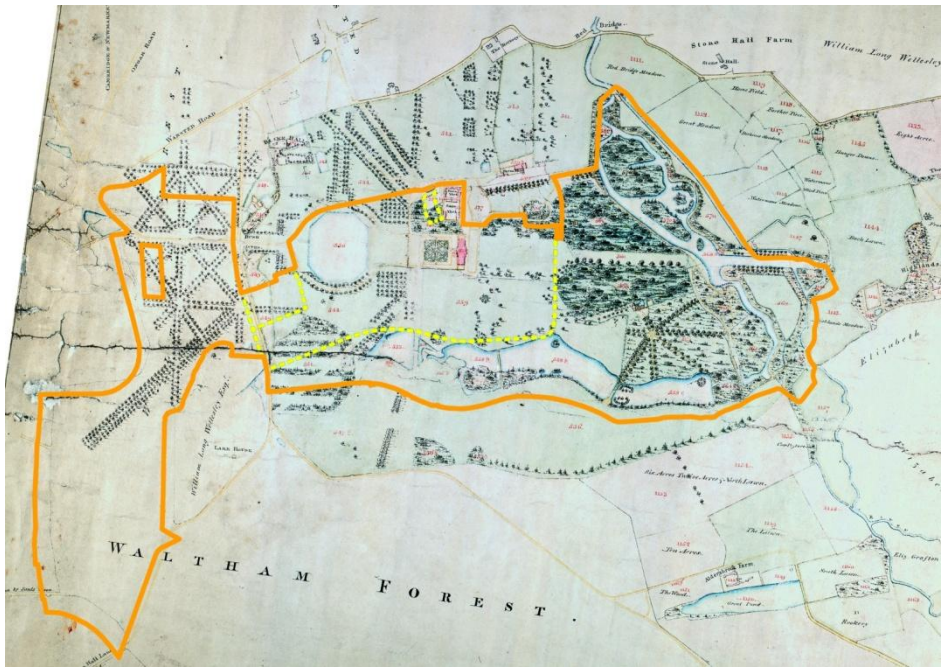
Wanstead Park, now little known outside of its immediate area, is the remnant of a once famous and influential historic landscape.

One of the primary objectives of the Friends of Wanstead Parklands is to raise awareness of the park's historical importance, and to expand the understanding of its history through original research, including archaeology.

Archaeology is relevant to Wanstead Park in three principal ways -

- 1. To shed light on the development of the landscaped gardens between the Stuart and late Georgian periods.**
- 2. To clarify the earlier history of Wanstead Park - early modern, mediaeval, Roman and prehistoric.**
- 3. By mapping areas of archaeological sensitivity, to help the park's custodians or utilities providers to avoid causing inadvertent damage during routine maintenance or improvement work.**

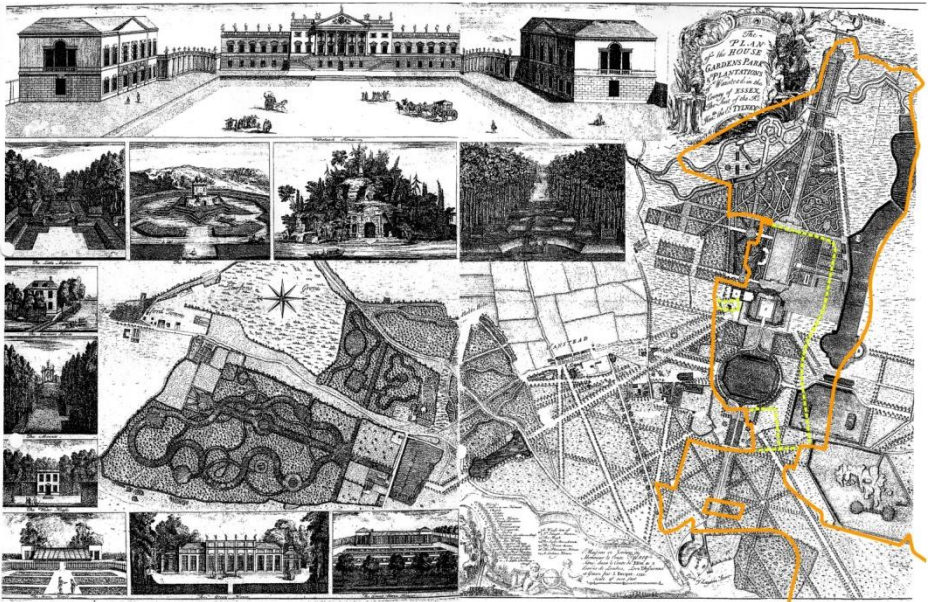
All current aerial imagery © 2012 Google



This plan, dating from around 1820, shows the relationship of the modern "registered park" to its historic predecessor.

The orange outline encloses the area registered as a Grade II* Park and Garden of Special Historic Interest by English Heritage. It extends to 398.5 acres, which includes the public park; golf course; sports grounds; Bush Wood and Wanstead Flats west of Lake House Road. The dashed yellow lines show the four landholders. These are: the Corporation of the City of London, Wanstead Sports Associations Ltd, Wanstead Parish, and the privately owned Blake Hall Club.

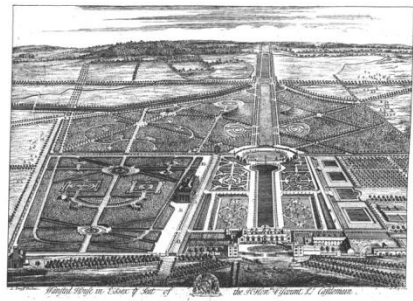
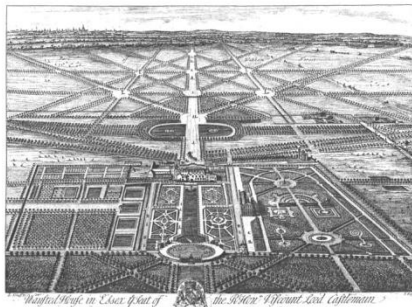
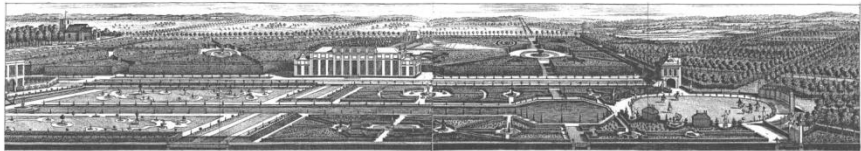
The plan shows the landscaped gardens surrounding Wanstead House in their last phase - the house was demolished only a few years later. The broad outlines of the late Georgian gardens seen here can still be discerned in the aerial photograph above.



This illustrated plan by the celebrated cartographer Jean Rocque dates from 1735, and includes the earliest full layout of the park known to exist.

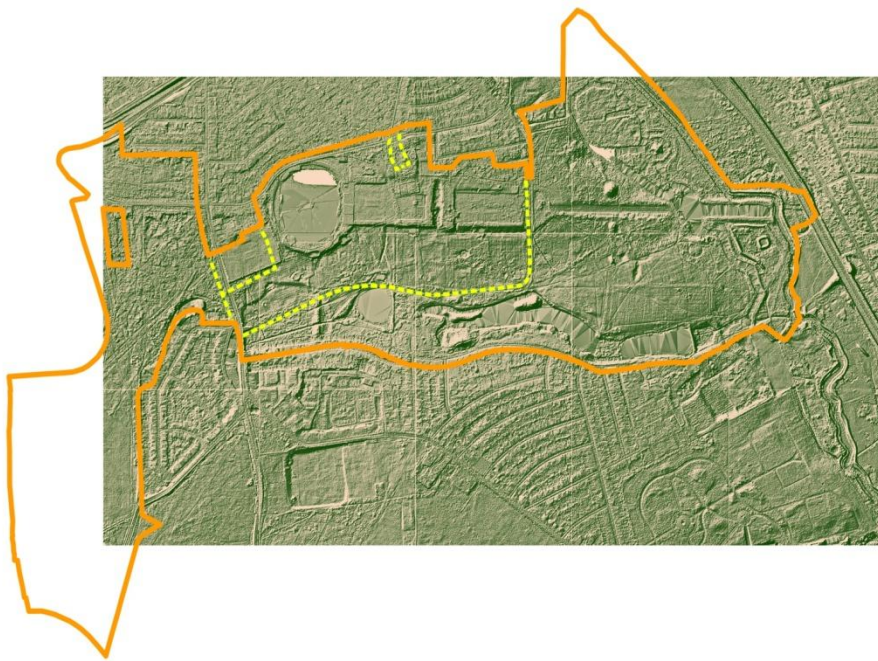
Unfortunately, it is quite problematic, as it illustrates a number of features which we know were never constructed, either as shown or at all.

The development of Wanstead Park - its landscaped gardens, and even its buildings - is not well recorded. The most important source of information we now possess comprises a miscellany of estate plans, schemes of improvement, maps, prints and paintings. If they describe what actually happened (which can be doubtful), they provide us at best with snapshots of a moment in time. However, in practice they were produced for a variety of purposes, and what they show will tend to reflect the reason why they were commissioned. Without knowing what this was, there is no way of telling the extent to which they reflect reality without independent evidence. Often, only archaeology can provide this.



Around 1713, Jan Kip and Leonard Knyff produced three views of the Wanstead estate - to the north, west and east. These show the old, Tudor, Wanstead House (demolished 1715), set in the gardens begun by Sir Josiah Child in the 1670s, and elaborated by his son Richard (later 1st Earl Tylney) in the Baroque manner between roughly 1700-1715. Kip and Knyff show us many features which we know existed by that time in some form, and which either still exist or which visitors commented upon over the following two decades. However, the question inevitably arises as to how accurate they were in detail. There is undoubtedly a degree of distortion or idealisation - the ground is shown as essentially flat, which it certainly is not! Certain other discrepancies suggest that they may, indeed, not have been depicting only what actually existed at the time. However, we have no idea of the extent to which that was the case.

Over the next century the gardens were gradually softened and made more naturalistic in style.

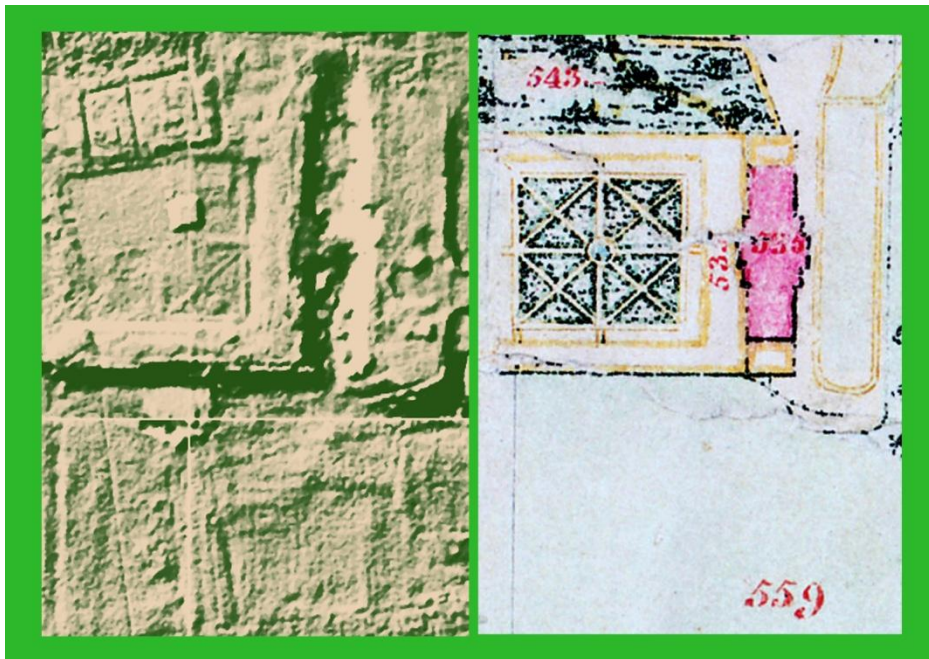


The Friends have taken the lead in recent years in researching the long history of Wanstead Park using cutting-edge archaeological surveying techniques.

One of these is LiDAR (Light Detection And Ranging) - an optical remote sensing technology that can measure the distance to, or other properties of, a target by using pulses from an airborne laser. Its great advantage is that it can produce "bare earth" terrain models which strip away vegetation cover.

The image shown above shows a great variety of earthworks within the park. The terrace upon which Wanstead House once stood, and the parterres which flanked it, are revealed very clearly, as well as a variety of ornamental garden features which are currently smothered in vegetation. Many more subtle features are also visible.

LiDAR demonstrates just how many features from Wanstead Park's history have survived. It has already proved to be an invaluable tool in helping to clarify aspects of the development of this unique landscape, and to assess the preservation of features, even where these are very inaccessible.

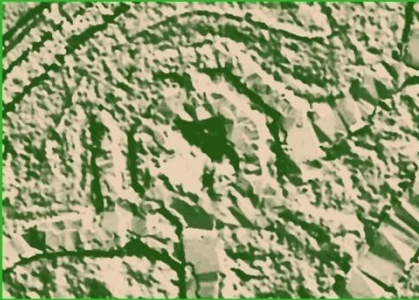


This and the following four panels show examples of the detail which LiDAR can provide of features which in some cases can barely be discerned at ground level.

The huge hole on the golf course where Wanstead House once stood is not easy to miss.

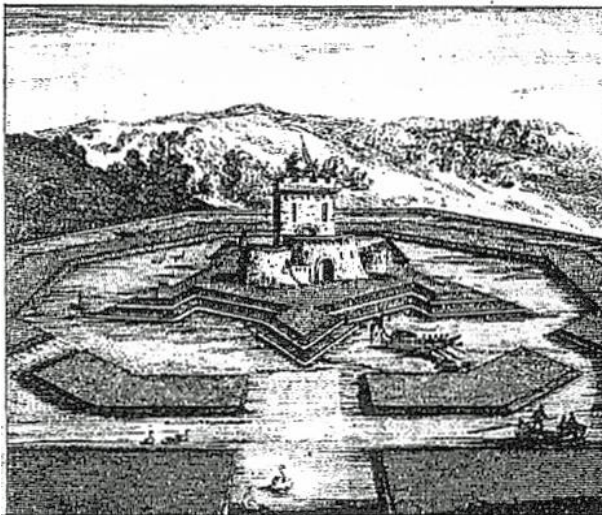


However, part of Humphrey Repton's parterre - a fragile, two hundred year old arrangement of paths and grassed-over flower beds - can still be picked up immediately to its west.



The Fortification:
its outline only faintly visible
under a blanket of trees
- but LiDAR shows it to
be well preserved

The "Fortification" echoes those often found around castles or indeed around whole towns and cities, especially in the Low Countries. They also occurred as garden features in Italy.

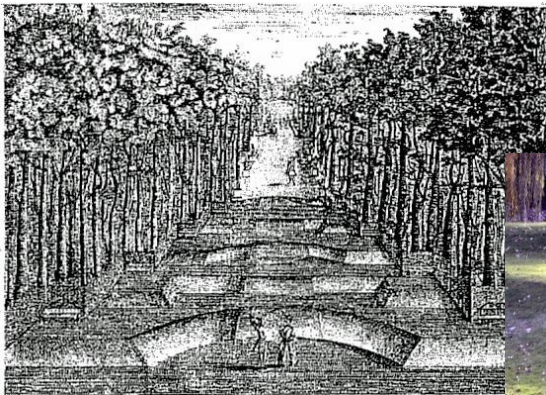


Rocque, in his plan of 1735, shows this feature in some detail. The fort is not shown on plans from the later eighteenth century, and had presumably gone by then, but foundations may still exist. The group of islands has certainly survived.



The Amphitheatre: a rare surviving feature of the baroque gardens. Now completely hidden - but LiDAR can see it.

This "amphitheatre", one of several, took the form of a grass-covered tiered earthwork of complex design. Now completely covered in trees, the terraces are nonetheless still detectable. The photograph is a detail of another, better preserved, example in Chiswick Park.





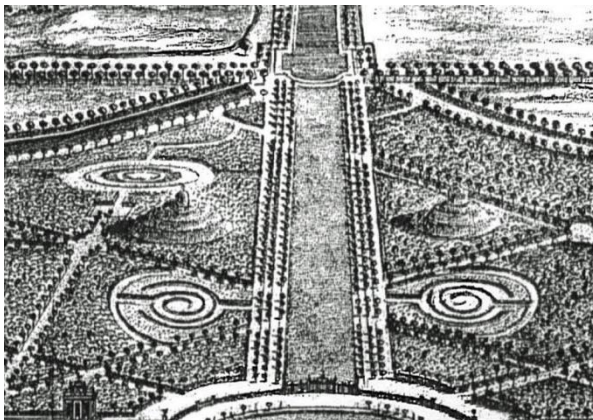
Left: the larger,
northern mount

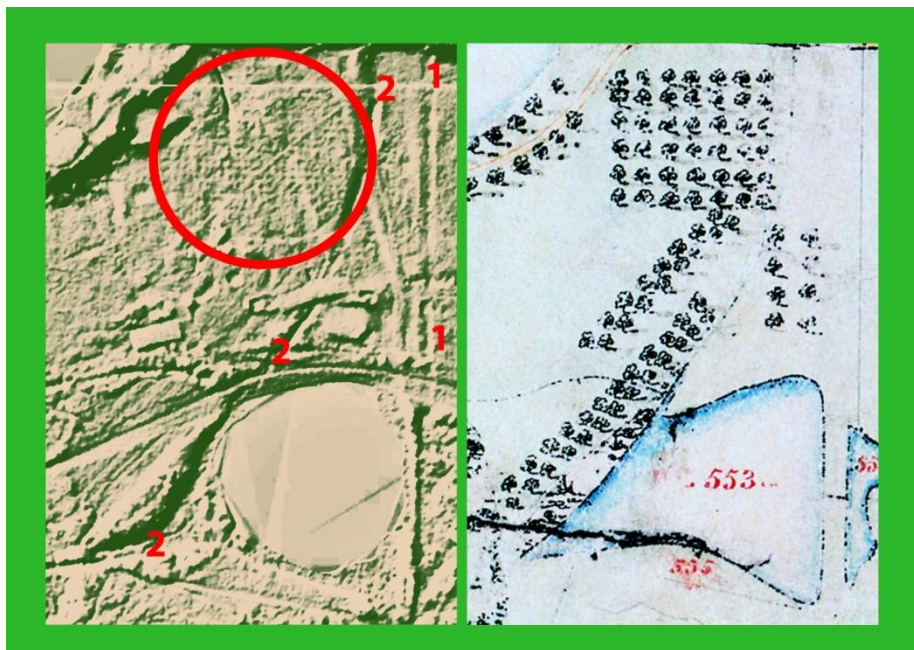
Right: the southern
mount

Below: a better
preserved example
in Lewes, Sussex



Wanstead had two spiral mounts, dating from around 1712. These small artificial hills were popular in high status gardens from the Elizabethan period onward, and were intended both to be "eye-catchers" in their own right and to provide a slightly elevated perspective over the garden. Those at Wanstead were constructed around 1712, perhaps using spoil excavated from the Long Walk which runs between them, and crowned with ornamental structures, long gone. They are now shapeless, eroded hummocks, covered with trees and scrub.

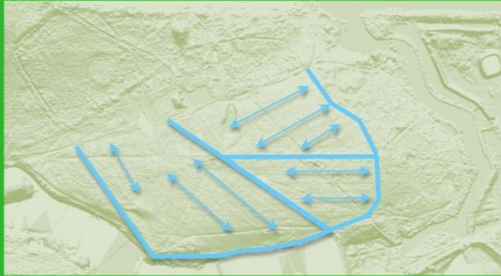




Preservation of very subtle features has been especially good on the golf course, due to control of scrub and regular mowing.

The circled area on the LiDAR image shows clear signs of rows of holes from the square plantation of trees shown on the adjacent plan from around 1820. Sadly these, along with some 2,000 of the park's other mature trees, were felled for timber during the asset-stripping activities of Hon. William Pole-Tylny-Long-Wellesley in the 1820s and 1830s.

The shallow ditch marked "1" marks the boundary between the "Old Park" and the "New Park". The latter had a road running through it, which is still traceable and marked "2". The attempts of Wellesley to close this road and exclude the public from the New Park led to a celebrated court action in 1813, which he lost. He shortly afterward achieved his objective by other means - a private Act of Parliament. However, records of the case show that local people long believed they had the right to access Wanstead Park for recreation even when it was privately owned.



First alignment

Wide ditches and banks: evidence of mediaeval or earlier agriculture?

Second alignment

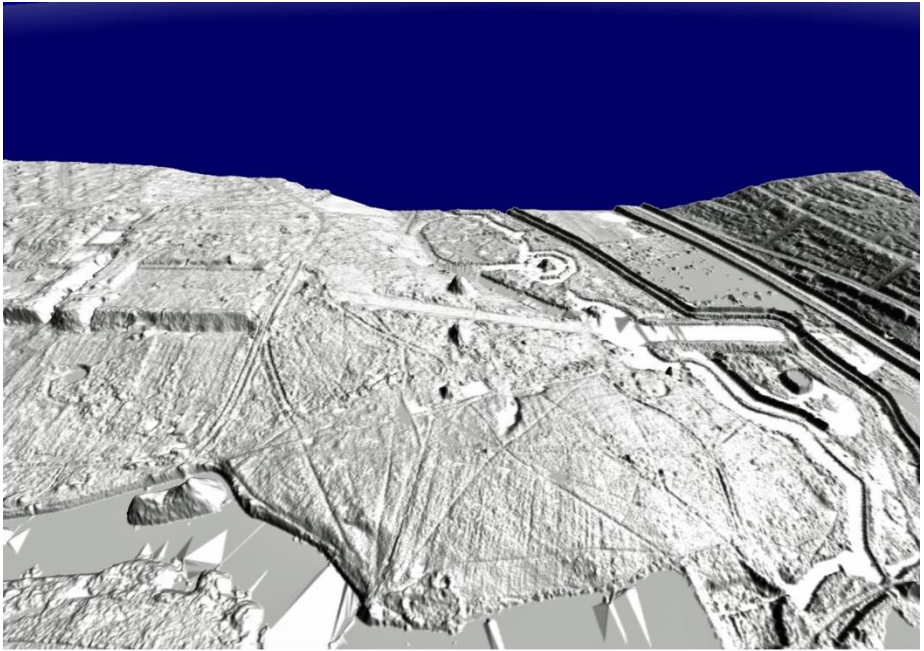
Ploughing leaves narrow furrows, consistent with the nineteenth century mechanical ploughing known to have taken place in 1882, when the Corporation of the City of London was preparing the part of the Wanstead estate it had purchased for use as a public park.



It is possible that LiDAR may shed some light on the park's earlier history - the Plain shows signs that it may have been covered by mediaeval or earlier field systems, for example. Remarkably, the lines of past furrows were not picked up by LiDAR directly, but via the rows of ant hills which seem to grow up most readily on the more yielding ground which has been turned in the past.

Dr Rob Wiseman produced the image above and interpretation.



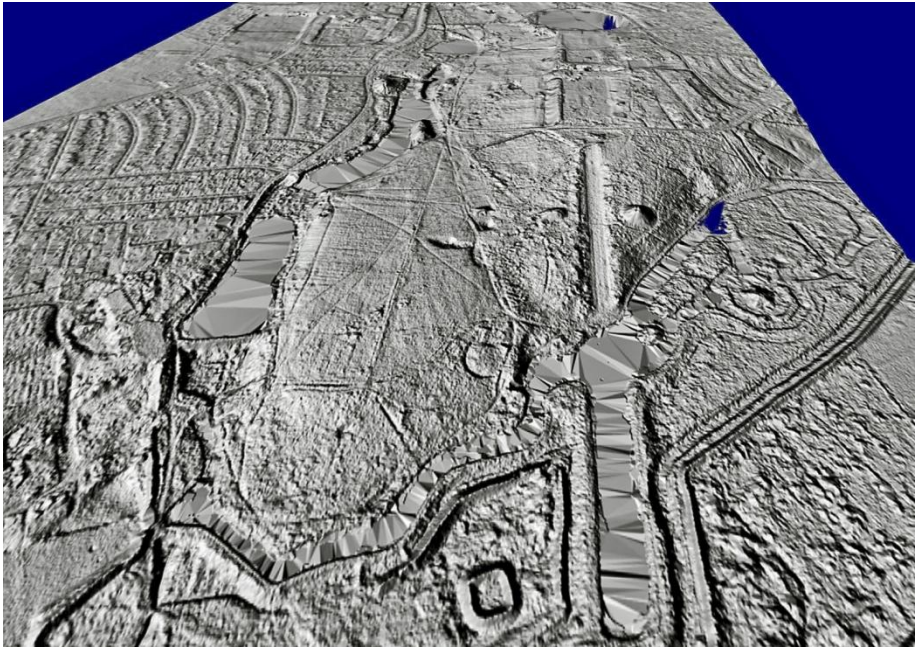


LiDAR data can be manipulated with visualisation software to enable the user to choose the angle and direction of apparent illumination, thus showing up any slight irregularities in the ground to best advantage. The vertical scale can also be exaggerated.

This image, also produced by Rob Wiseman, shows the park from the south.

The exaggerated vertical scale clearly shows the artificially levelled terrace upon which Wanstead House stood, the eastern parterre, and the vista beyond, down the Long Walk to the east.

"Stripes" across the Plain, presumably showing past cultivation, also show up extremely well. Buried ditches on this alignment show up on geophysical surveys of this area, but have not yet been dated. Their north-west to south-east orientation looks characteristically prehistoric, but they could equally be mediaeval.

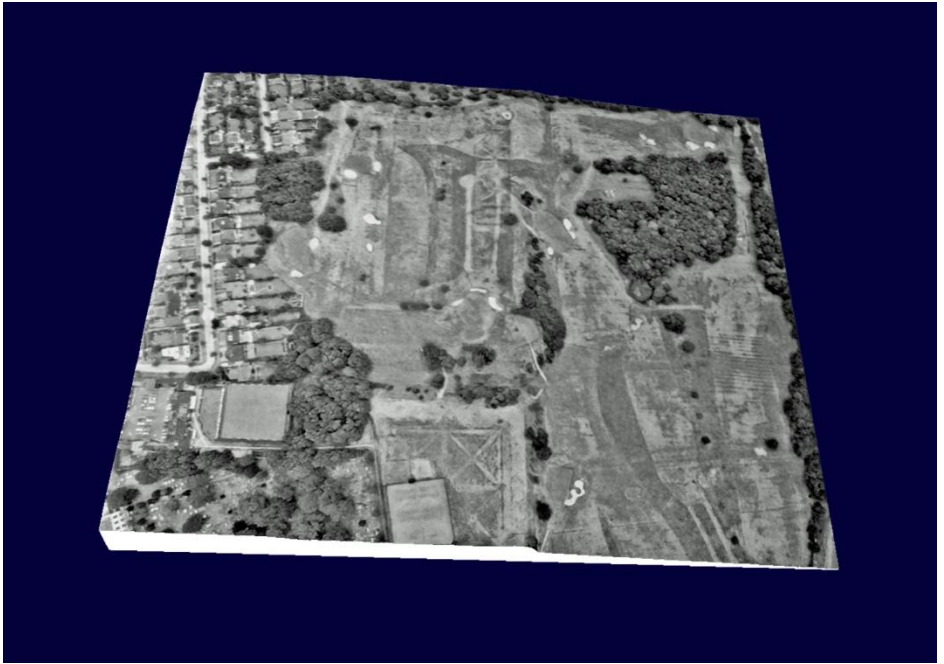


A similar image to the previous, but from a point of view to the east, looking along the main axis of the park. It was produced by Ralph Potter, who has led the archaeological project for the Friends and, previously, the Wanstead Parklands Community Project, since 2005.

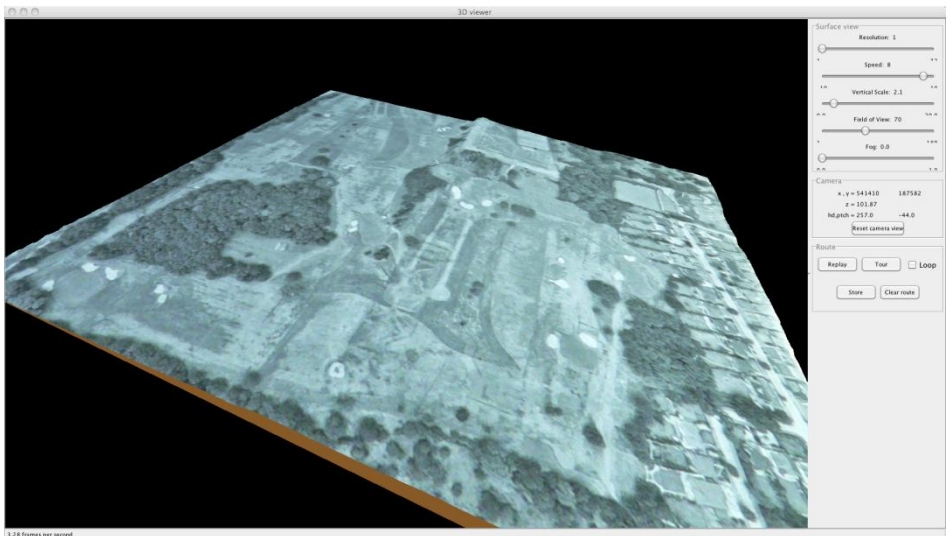
This viewpoint shows the significant excavation that was required to create the Long Walk, as the naturally convex profile of the ground was flattened to allow the water of the Straight Canal to be seen from the *piano nobile* of the house - the first floor, where the state rooms were situated.

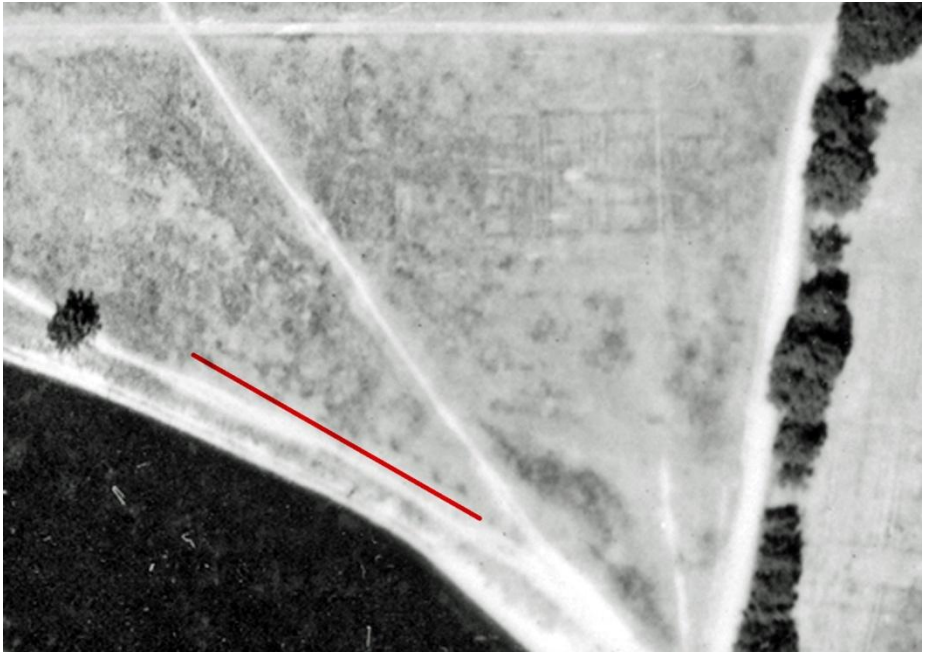
In the far distance, at the top, may be seen the Basin, created in around 1722 from a pair of pre-existing semicircular lakes. It may be the prototype for that in Kensington Gardens, but is much larger.





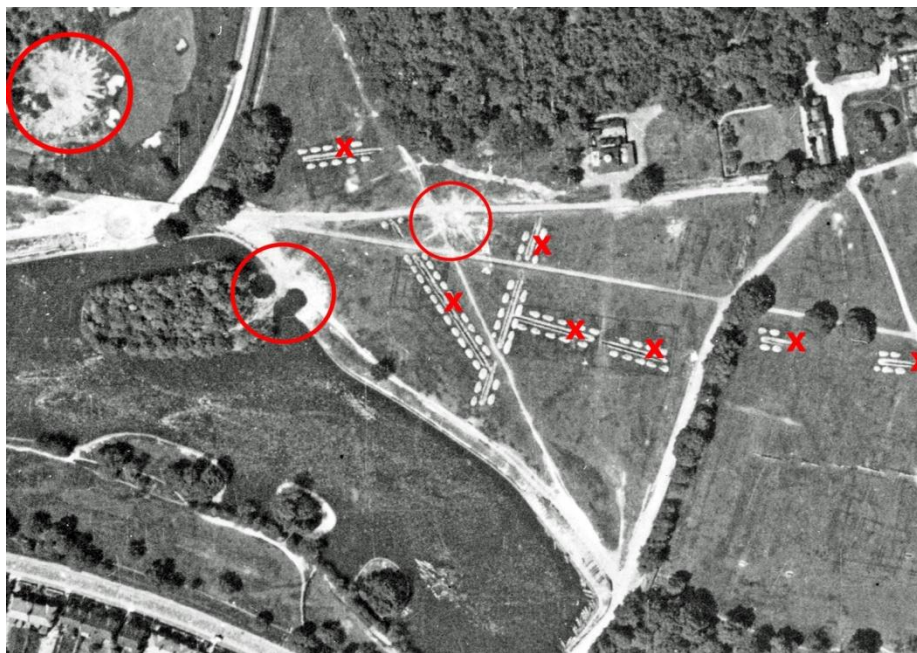
Aerial photographs and other data can be draped on top of the LiDAR terrain models to create a "3D" effect which can be another valuable aid to interpretation.





Over the last couple of years, the Friends have carried out a review of historic aerial photographs dating back to the early 1940s. The object has been to find images showing crop marks, parch marks and shadows which might disclose the presence of archaeology. This exercise has been a considerable success. On the golf course, elements of the baroque and later gardens have been traceable in favourable conditions. On the Plain, which was also regularly mown until the last war, a variety of features appear to reflect those which have shown up on geophysical surveys. Some are entirely new.

Several images from 1941-7 show long parallel rows of filled-in holes close to the north bank of the Heronry Pond. These are strongly suggestive of an unknown avenue of trees. This appears to pre-date the pond, as the latter seems to have been dug with no regard to it. Was this "avenue" a temporary feature intended to screen the construction of the Heronry Pond from the gardens to the north? Could it be the one which occasioned the discovery - and destruction - of a Roman mosaic in 1715?

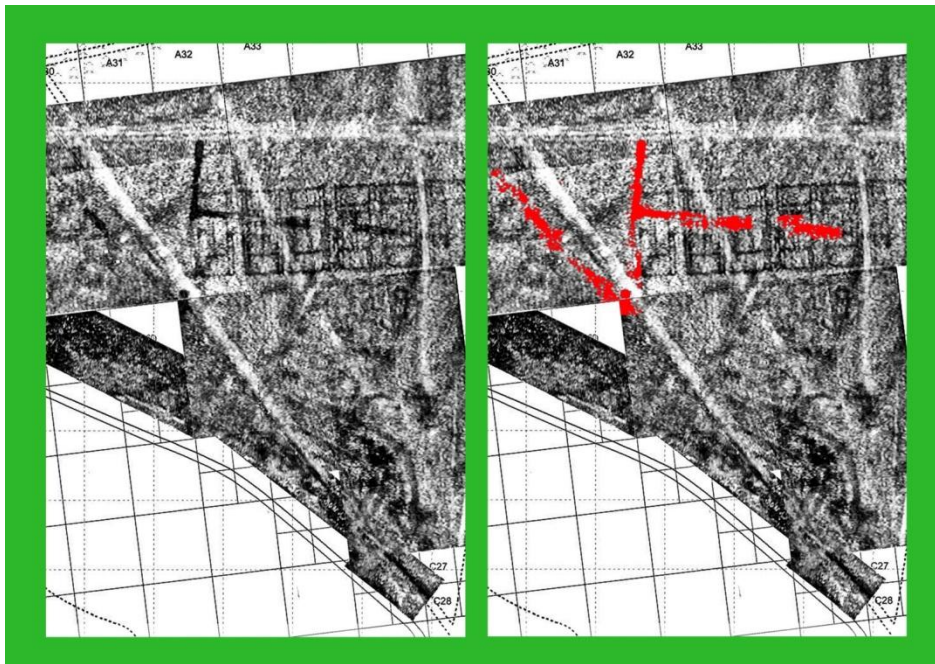


Aerial photographs can shed light on features of recent origin which would otherwise baffle archaeologists - unless, of course, they are able to excavate them.

The Second World War left numerous scars in Wanstead Park. The photograph above, from 1941, shows a number of bomb craters (circled), and a complex arrangement of anti-glider defences.

The latter consisted of shallow ditches, poles strung with wire, or both, erected across open land to obstruct the landing of enemy aircraft and gliders. Wanstead Park had both ditches and poles.

Most anti-glider defences were created between 1939 and 1941. Once the threat of invasion had receded, they were gradually abandoned. In Wanstead Park the piles of sandbags were gone by 1944, and the ditches were backfilled shortly after.



The Wanstead Parklands Community Project, sponsor of the present Friends group which has now superseded it, embarked on an ambitious geophysical survey of The Plain in Wanstead Park in 2006.

Now drawing towards its end, the survey was primarily concerned with clarifying the nature and extent of Roman activity in the park. However, in doing so, it has shed a good deal of incidental light on other periods of the long history of Wanstead Park. This has ranged from previously unexpected Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age activity, the expected Roman finds, through evidence of eighteenth century landscaping, to 1930s tennis courts!

The survey also found some baffling buried features which were only explained when the previous photograph came to light. These images show what the back-filled anti-glider ditches look like on radar.

Underneath them are a variety of prehistoric and (probably) Roman features.

WANSTEAD'S ROMAN VILLA

WHAT WAS IT?

In the previous article in this series, Wanstead Parklands Community Project (WPCP) member **Richard Anrop** discussed the clues as to where Wanstead's Roman villa may have stood. This month, Richard studies the evidence for what kind of building it might have been



The term 'villa' has come to be applied to any Roman-style house in a rural setting. The distinguishing characteristic is the 'Roman-ness' of the materials, construction methods and decorative finish, rather than size or status. Some villa types – though thoroughly 'Roman' in their construction – bore no relationship to Mediterranean or Gallic prototypes and were unique to Britain.

The Roman character of villas should not be taken to imply that the farmers and landowners who built and lived in them were necessarily settlers (although some were). The majority would have been prosperous people of British origin who had chosen to adopt the standards, way of life and material culture of the Roman world. In some cases they may have seen Romanisation as a route to advancement or as a way of advertising their status. In others, it may simply have been a matter of personal preference or identification.

Then as now, rural dwellings came in a variety of forms. It goes without saying that individual buildings were influenced by the particular site and materials available, and the means of the owners. Villas also varied according to their uses. Some were functional farmhouses, with very modest domestic quarters and much of the space given over to animals, storage or agricultural or craft work. Others, by contrast, were primarily designed for comfort, display and entertainment. Of the latter, some were designed as the primary residence for a wealthy landowner; others were rural retreats or hunting lodges – a spearhead found at Wanstead in 1995 may suggest that hunting for boar or deer was one of the pastimes carried out there. In addition, many Roman estates, like some of the medieval manors which succeeded them, were owned by absentee landlords who rarely or never visited. In these cases the buildings were likely to be utilitarian establishments where agents or stewards held sway, along with the main house.

Large estates often had a variety of other structures – slave quarters, stables, barns, shrines, bath houses and family mansions, for example.

Although we don't yet have a ground plan, we already know some things about the estate focused on Wanstead Park. In the first place, it appears that there was more than one building. As well as the mosaic pavement found in 1715, we are told there were 'foundations' some 200 yards to the south associated with 'mounds'. Perhaps this was an estate centred with a temple or mausoleum, though we may never know for certain. Our own geophysical surveys in recent years also led to more than one building at a phase of activity in the general area where we believe the mosaic was discovered.

Unfortunately, all of the Roman remains discovered in the 18th century were destroyed, and the only useful description we have is of the mosaic itself. This was quite large, being some 20 feet by 16 feet. The design comprised 'a border about a foot broad... composed of red dice, about three quarters of an inch square, within which were several ornaments'. Inside this was 'the figure of a man riding upon some beast and holding something in his hands'. As suggested by the Royal Commission for Historic Monuments in 1921, this description seems consistent with the popular motif of Bacchus riding on a tiger, leopard or panther and holding a thyrsus, or knive staff.

Where they occur in Roman houses, Bacchus mosaics were most often to be found in dining rooms. An image of the god in a place devoted to entertaining would have seemed appropriate to a Roman audience – Bacchus lived his followers born care through wine, music and dance.

A mosaic of this kind indicates a building of high status, decorated pavements, and especially those incorporating geometric and figurative designs, were very expensive, as they required teams of specialist craftsmen to lay them. We also know that the floors in this villa were not purely decorative: fragments of blue tiles found in the vicinity indicate that it had a hypocaust system – the Roman version of under-floor central heating.

The house also had sophisticated painted decoration, Jack Thorney has found pieces of painted wall plaster in the 1960s, and much more was discovered by Frank Clark two decades later. He observed that 'The plaster... on examination showed a basic geometrical pattern possibly infilled with some landscape and human figures'. The pigments used were a mixture of natural



earths, such as yellow ochre, and expensive artificial colours, such as cinnabar or 'Egyptian Blue'. They were applied to the damp plaster using the fresco technique, another highly skilled process.

How the villa was constructed is more difficult to assess. A good deal of building material has been found in the dam between Hareby and Pheasant Ponds, including fragments of worked stone. Some brick, tile and mortar was certainly of Roman date, but late medieval material was also present, which could indicate that the stone was rubble from old Wanstead House, which was demolished around 1715. One possibility is that, apart from the foundations (and the bath suite, assuming there was one), the villa may have been mostly of timber framed construction. Certainly, large numbers of nails have been found scattered around the site.

Roman pottery has been found in Wanstead Park dating from the first century to the end of the Roman period. However, at least in the area which has received most archaeological attention, there seems to have been a step change in the scale of activity from the late third or early fourth century. This may indicate a change of ownership and use, with a grand house being built on, or moved to, a fresh site. The fourth century has been called the 'Golden Age' of the Romano-British country side, with many villas being built or expanded. The latest datable object so far found in Wanstead Park is a coin of Valens, who was killed in battle in 378. By this time the shadows were lengthening over the Roman West. Within a few decades the villas were being abandoned as the state and economy which had supported them withered, and historical emigration on the journey that was to turn it into England.

For more information on the work of the Wanstead Parklands Community Project, visit www.wansteadpark.org.uk

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Wanstead Park is one of the few large areas of known archaeological potential in the lower Roding Valley which remains open and comparatively undisturbed. Such archaeological investigation as has been carried out over the years has been quite localised in relation to the total size of the site.

As well as doing practical work within the park, the Wanstead Parklands Community Project, and now the Friends, act as advocates for Wanstead Park and its heritage. The Community Project and the Friends have produced a series of DVDs and publications, and have used the media to keep local people in touch with their activities.

The archaeological project remains perennially of interest in Wanstead. The 2009 campaign of evaluation trenching was registered as a Festival of British Archaeology event and attracted an estimated 500 visitors over two days. As well as arousing considerable public interest, it attracted press attention, raising the profile of the park locally. That is exactly what the Friends are trying to achieve!

Why join the Friends of Wanstead Parklands?

We can give you ten good reasons!

- You can help our campaign to give Wanstead Park - a unique Grade II* listed landscape and waterscape - a sustainable future.
- You will gain a voice to question the park's custodians, and a structure to work with them.
- You can help us press for a park that is more actively managed and safer for everyone to enjoy.
- You stand to benefit from a restored park, which will boost the attractiveness of Wanstead as a place to live.
- You will get invitations to free walks and other activities.
- You will be offered reduced-price tickets to events.
- You will receive a free introductory DVD.
- You will have access to our range of DVDs and publications.
- You will receive regular newsletters.
- You can get "hands on"! If you wish, there are opportunities to help with archaeology, practical tasks, litter picks and events.

Membership cost options

1. £2.00 per year per individual
2. £5.00 per year household
3. £20.00 life membership per person
4. £35.00 joint life membership

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