A tree and woodland strategy for Wimbledon Park, March 2022.

Dave Dawson

This strategy aims to provide a framework to assist the tree, shrub and woodland initiatives in the public Wimbledon Park ("park" below). It starts with the headlines of the framework and then moves on to the background, history and the principles underpinning the strategy. Comments are sought on this strategy, so that a programme can be taken forward with community support.

Multiple use

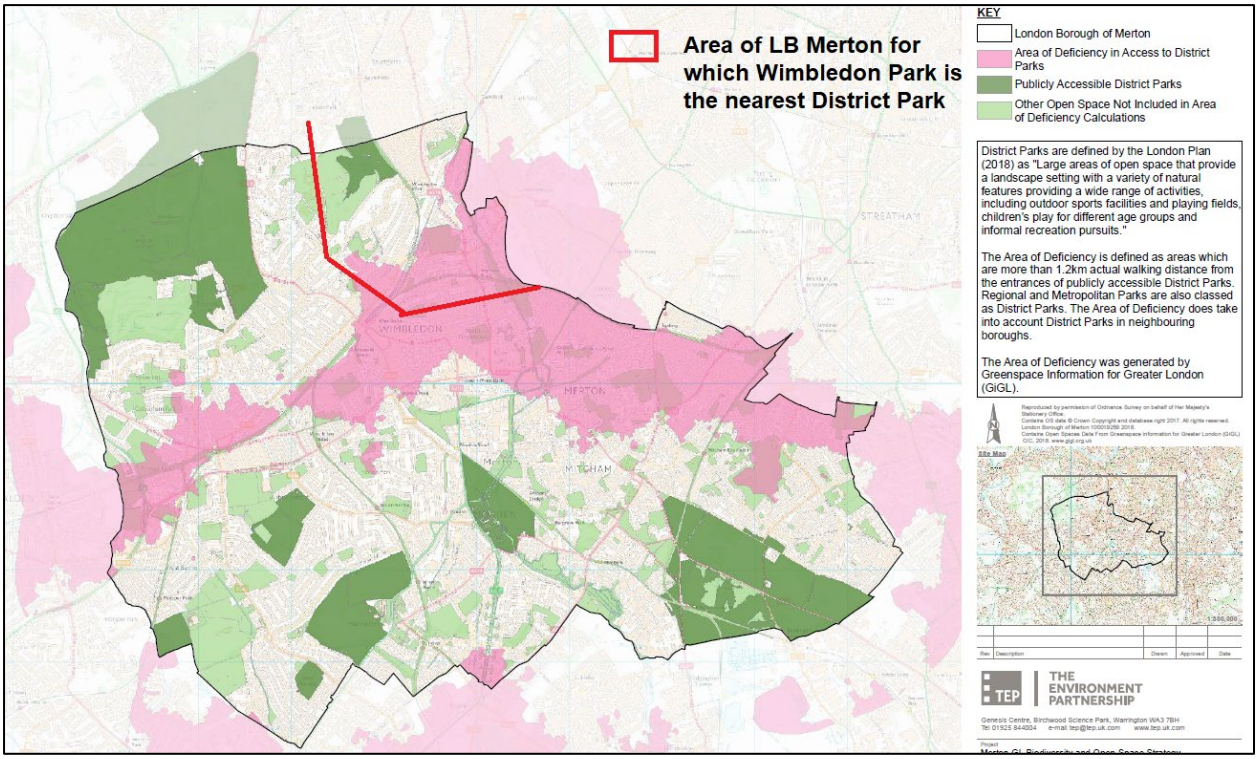

Figure 1. District Parks and Areas of Deficiency in District Parks in LB Merton.

The public Wimbledon Park is a District Park in the London-wide parks hierarchy (Figure 1), recognising its function as providing multiple open space uses for people visiting from distances of 1.2 km. Such parks are "*Large areas of open space that provide a landscape setting with a variety of natural features. They provide a wide range of activities, including outdoor sports facilities and playing fields, children's play for different age groups and informal recreation pursuits*[1]. There are eight other District Parks in LB Merton. The area within the red line on Figure 1 is that for which Wimbledon Park is the nearest District Park. It extends across some 3.5 km^2 of LB Merton, about half of which is an Area of Deficiency in District Parks. The catchment in LB Wandsworth is not known, but would be similar in size and composition, with King Georges' Park the nearest possible District Park in Wandsworth. The catchment of the park in the two boroughs is estimated to have a population of around 50.000 people[2]. Trees, shrubs, hedgerows and woodland contribute to a healthy environment for park users and are free-to-use. Such free opportunities were given priority in the consultation responses to the Masterplan for the park[3]. Other free-to-use facilities, however, include the Great Field, two children's play spaces, the Waterfall, table tennis, a dog-free open space and pathways. Other activities are paid for. A balance should be struck between these various uses, so that all needs are met.

Trees sequester carbon and so increasing tree cover is one of the few things that people can do to help avoid global heating. However, preventing the loss of trees is much more effective than is the growth of new trees. This is because sequestration is, at best, very slow and that a mature tree or woodland releases carbon when the trees die, unless the wood can then be put into some long-term use[4]. Hard though they are, lifestyle changes to reduce carbon emissions are much more effective than is tree planting.

Lancelot Brown's design for Wimbledon Park.

The 18 ha public park is part of a Grade II* listed historic park, which also includes the 9 ha lake, 30 ha golf course and 4 ha Wimbledon Club. The listed park is the surviving remnant of the 375 ha 18th century park landscaped by Lancelot Brown for the first Earl Spencer.

The 1784 Montreal map of the 18th century park[5], documents the completed Brown design in excellent detail. Excerpts from that map are reproduced as Figures 2 & 3.

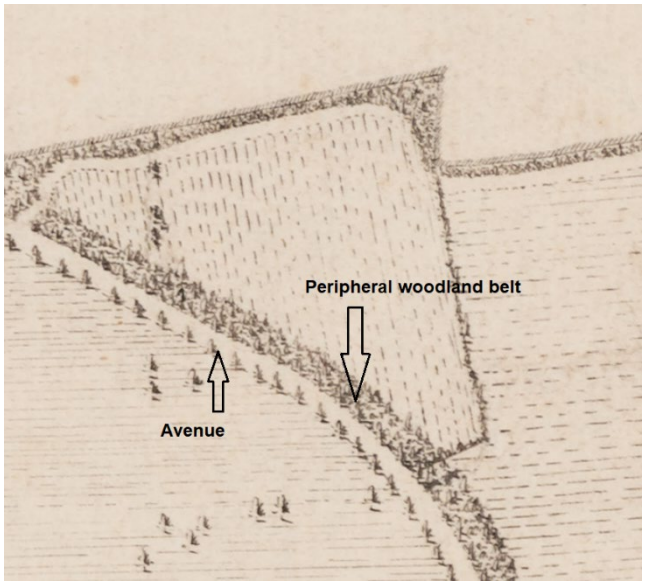

Figure 2. Brown's peripheral avenue

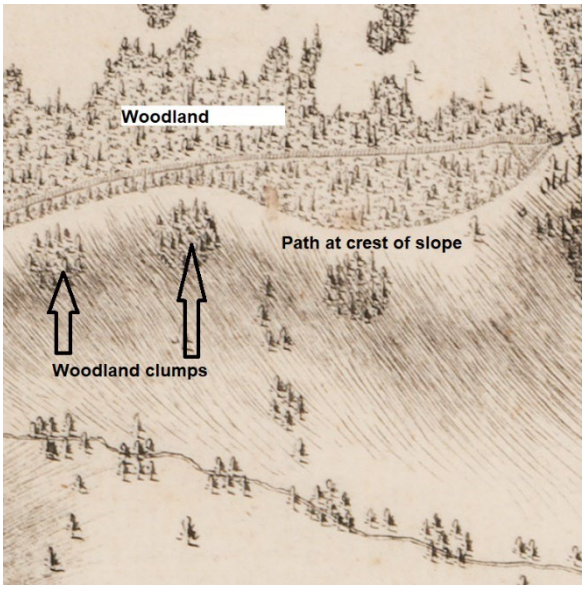

Figure 3. Path in and out of woodland

Perhaps because most of Brown's Wimbledon Park is lost to suburbia, the many books on Brown say very little about the 18th century Wimbledon Park. Indeed, we could easily be misled by speculations based upon Brown's work elsewhere[6]. Perhaps the best distillation of Brown's practice is to be found in three sources published for his tercentenary: a technical review for English Heritage[7], the Natural England report *Biodiversity in Brownian landscapes* and my own popular account of the history of Wimbledon Park itself, prepared for an exhibition at the Plaistow Gallery[8].

Whilst these Three principles are followed:

1. *Peripheral woodland belts delimiting the Spencers' private park.* This is echoed today with peripheral hedgerows and woodlands throughout the remnant heritage landscape, some planted and others originating as natural colonisation.
2. *Peripheral carriageway delimited by an avenue.* This is followed today by the perimeter path which is flanked by hedgerows beside the tube line embankment and avenues of Railway poplars on the other side of the path. As the poplars are lost, they are being replaced by Hornbeams.
3. *Peripheral path passing in and out of woodland, allowing views across the parkland.* This is suggested beside the perimeter path south of Horse Close Wood and around the stadium.

Also, it is proposed to replace losses, where possible. The loss of part of Horse Close Wood for a car park should be reversed to restore the historic form of the wood.

The heritage landscape is the surviving remnant of Capability Brown's eighteenth-century Wimbledon Park, and our work aims to reflect Brown's design as far as is possible in a modern, multiple-use open space. The selection of species reflects Brown's practice, in that

it employs a good range of tree and shrub species known to have been used by Brown, but we have focused on native species, to help deliver access to nature.

Some of the planting was with a mix rich in spiny shrubs, designed to deter access to old trees which were at risk from fires and barbeques.

A few of the trees in the public park date back to Brown and Spencer's time, as do the two old woodlands[9].

The area was managed as farmland after the Spencers became absentee landlords in 1827 and, from 1846 on, housing development destroyed most of Brown's Park. The listed site was used for various sports use until the Wimbledon Club purchased its site in 1899 and the rest of it was purchased in 1915 by Wimbledon Municipal Borough, to prevent further loss to housing, but the public park was not landscaped until the 1920s.

This incorporated pre-existing trees, including the veteran Oak (now about 200 years old), the 17th century Horse Close Wood[10] and half of the ancient Ashen Grove Wood[11]. Many other old trees date back to the 1920s. In the 1920s, a Hawthorn hedgerow was planted on the boundary with the golf course in the north (indicated as T on the plan). An arboretum was developed in the landscaped southern part of the park (U), now compromising over 80 species of tree and shrub. Some of the older trees in the park are now becoming unsafe, some have fallen, and safety works have led to further attrition. Prominent amongst these losses have been many of the mature Lombardy poplars around the stadium and Railway poplars beside the perimeter path in the east.

Two wide hedgerows were established in the 1990s. These are shown in green on the plan. Area P was planted by local school children with the assistance of the late Dave Lofthouse, Merton Tree Officer, and Cecile Reynes-Bridgens of Wimbledon Park Residents' Association around 1990, and area L by Dave Lofthouse soon afterwards.

Horse Close Wood dates back at least to the 17th century and retains the same outline as in the early 18th century. At its western end, a clearance was made for Lake Farm in the early 19th century and this was later used for polo and as a piggery. It had reverted back to woodland by the 1940s, but was subsequently cleared to make a car park. I carried out a consultation and wrote the management plan for Horse Close Wood in 2015 and this was revised in 2019. The plan is adopted by LB Merton. A recent project there was the meadow in the Lofthouse Glade, near the eastern end of the wood (just north of area G). It has its own management brief.

Resource constraints meant that LB Merton had to concentrate on tree safety at the expense of replacements and new planting, so volunteers from the Friends of Wimbledon Park and Tree Warden Group Merton developed a tree-planting and maintenance strategy in conjunction with LB Merton.

Planting began around Horse Close Wood. It was to screen the car park from view, to protect old trees from harm and to increase the amount of woodland. Most was in blocks of whips (young, bare root trees and shrubs 0.5 to 1 metre tall) because these grow quickly and a few losses do not matter. Larger, standard trees are not cost-effective because they need much aftercare before the roots recover from the planting.

The choice of species was informed by the composition of the existing old woodlands (Appendix 1) and the areas planted on Capability Brown's landscape principles (Appendix 2).

Planting began with funding from the Mayor of London in areas A & B in February 2016, subsequent planting was funded locally. This was on C and the southern edge of B in February 2017, D & E in February 2018 and F in February 2020. Replacements for losses in E and F were planted in March 2022.

Standard Hornbeams were planted to replace losses in the avenue of Railway poplars in areas I & J in February 2019. In 2022, five Hornbeam whips were planted in flower beds, two were replacements for standards lost in area J and three were new at the northern end of I. Two or three of these survived into the summer.

A “copse” with standard trees over Dogwood was planted just south of the brook in area O in February 2019. This area is surrounded by a failed and discontinued “wildflower meadow” plot.

Establishment of these areas has been good, the only area currently needing a few replacements being area D.

Areas P, Q, and A to C are well-established, requiring no more planting.

There is an opportunity to enhance the woodland ground flora in the areas of established planting, see appendix 1.

Long grass beside the tennis courts

O, Q & F. LB Merton has failed to manage an agreed area of meadow grass between the periphery pathway and the adjacent Copse and hedgerow planting. A 1.5 metre strip beside the path is mown regularly and the rest left long. Suckers of Blackthorn, arching stems of Bramble and creeping Ivy are invading the long grass. Without volunteers cutting this back, this area would soon become scrub. Like all meadows, it requires mowing twice in Spring and late Summer to maintain the long grass whilst preventing the scrub invasion. There is an option to allow scrub invasion to reduce the long grass strip to 1.5 metres width, so swopping some long grass for a wider hedgerow.

Possible new planting areas in approximate priority order.

G. Now that National Grid have taken up their underground cables and tanks, this entrance to the glade in Horse Close Wood can be narrowed with whips both West and East of the path, about 30 in total. Unfortunately, logs from Ashen Grove Wood were used in early 2022 to demark a path here that is far too wide. This would need to be remedied before planting this area.

H. This corner of the great field is already separated off by the “wildflower meadow” plots from the rest of the field and often has standing water. A triangular area of mainly wet woodland species is suggested.

L. The Copse (O) is surrounded by failed “wildflower meadow”. Here the suggestion is that north and south (L) of the Copse could be planted as hedgerow. The west side of the Copse would be planted with Dogwood, so extending it to the edge of the grass..

K. A beech hedge along this edge would screen off the railway security fence. This needs to be narrow, a single zig-zag line of trees.

M & N. We suggest woodland clumps set back 1.5 metres from the perimeter path, to retain sightlines for security. This would echo a Brown carriageway design.

X. A flood-control bund was installed here in Spring 2022. A wide hedgerow could be planted on its crest to screen the car park from view.

R. Horse Close Wood car park was part of the wood until the development of Lake Farm in the first half of the nineteenth century. The farm buildings were converted for housing Polo ponies and then used for a piggery in World War I. By 1950 the area had returned to woodland, but a car park was imposed here by 1980. Woodland planting there would restore the original extent of the wood.

U. This area, below the downslope from the dam, has many exotic trees as a mini arboretum, but used to be the northern-most part of the ancient Ashen Grove Wood. In early 2022, it was proposed to be added to the adjacent Site of Importance for nature conservation in proposals for the new LB Merton Local Plan. It has been disturbed by the re-routed Wimbledon Park Brook, and small parts might have woodland planting. Replacements of any lost trees could reflect the species composition of Ashen Grove Wood.

S & Y. The Lombardy poplars along the north and south sides of the stadium provide valuable wildlife habitat but it is increasingly expensive to keep them safe and there are unsubstantiated claims that their roots are harming the running track. Those along the long east side were felled in 2015. The Leylandii hedge around the stadium has long outgrown its function. The straight edges of the hedge don't fit with Brown's design and it cuts off long views from the great field across the lake towards St Mary's Wimbledon. Now that the hedge bottom is no longer cleared of "weeds", natural regeneration[12] (see below) would lead to the development of replacement hedgerow plants. It would also be possible to imitate a Capability Brown carriageway by planting clumps of trees on the Great Field side of the perimeter path.

Y. Water often pools along the northern side of the perimeter path north of the stadium. It seems that the path holds back water flowing down a natural drainage (Hall's Brook) presenting an opportunity for a planting areas of wet woodland there. There is also a potential to extend the stadium a few metres north into the Great Field here, so as to provide space for additional lanes on the running track. Planting should be positioned so as to allow this.

T. The 100-year-old hedgerow is almost entirely on the golf course side of the boundary fence, but is a great asset to the public park, supporting some 60 species. Unfortunately, there is limited space on the public park side of the boundary, but it would be beneficial to manage this space as long grass to complement the adjacent woody vegetation.

Natural regeneration

V. The strip between the perimeter path and southern boundary of the park has old Horse chestnuts and Sycamores. Beneath are areas of Bramble and self-established shrubs and young trees. Much of this has happened by natural regeneration. New planting could supplement this. However, the stands of Bramble limit, but if the Bramble can be grubbed up this could be attempted.

W. In 2018, the area beneath the veteran Oak by the ex-bowls green was fenced to protect the tree. Since then, there has been natural regeneration of woody species[13]. This shows that woodland establishment occurs, if slowly, where mowing ceases. The main aim for the vegetation here is to add to the effect of the fence to deter public access to the base of the veteran and so protect it from barbeque or fire. A side benefit is a new area of woody vegetation. However, it would not be appropriate to allow extensive, dense woody cover to develop because of competition with the veteran. Management will be needed in future to confine the dense woody cover to the periphery.

Appendix 1

The planting mix

The existing old woodlands of the heritage landscape fit National Vegetation Classification W8d, which is indicative of moist, fertile, base-rich soils, characterised here by a canopy of English Oak and Ash with a sub-canopy of Elm suckers. Other trees and shrubs appropriate to the soils here include Field maple, Hornbeam, Hazel, Hawthorn, Bramble, Dog rose, Yew, Holly and Elder. Ash, Bramble, Holly and Elder self-seed readily and so do not need to be planted. Blackthorn would be appropriate but only well away from the woodland edge, because this species suckers out into grasslands. The non-native Sycamore, Norway Maple, Bay and Evergreen Oak have spread in Horse Close Wood and will probably colonise planted areas as well, but these are near-native, being found in mainland Europe nearby and so are not inappropriate here. Following rain, Horse Close Wood has standing water in places and a wet woodland shrub, Grey Willow (or Common Sallow), has colonised in the Glade. The wood lacks three other trees of wet woodland: Native Alder, Downy Birch and Rowan, but these three would also be appropriate on seasonally wet soils. Ground flora indicative of wet woodland includes Figwort and Yellow flag iris, The table below summarises the appropriate tree and shrub species to plant.

Species	Latin name	Dry places	Wet places
Alder	Alnus glutinosa		X
Aspen	Populus tremula	X	
Hornbeam	Carpinus betulus	X	
Crab apple	Malus sylvestris	X	
Dog rose	Rosa canina	X	
Dogwood	Cornus sanguinea	X	
Downy birch	Betula pubescens		X
English oak	Quercus robur	X	
Field maple	Acer campestre	X	
Guelder rose	Viburnum opulus	X	X
Hawthorn	Crataegus monogyna	X	X
Hazel	Corylus avellana	X	X
Rowan	Sorbus aucuparia		X
Small-leaved lime	Tilia cordata	X	
Wild cherry	Prunus avium	X	
Yew	Taxus baccata	X	

As planted areas become established, they are colonised by Ivy, Bramble, seedling trees and shrubs and ground flora, such as Cow parsley, Garlic mustard, Cuckoo pint, Pendulous sedge, Stinking iris, Great willowherb, Herb Robert, Hogweed and Wood dock. Horse Close Wood has a good range of ground flora but lacks two nice species suited to these soils: Primrose and Wood anemone. Any wet woodland planting, however, has the potential for introducing a wider range of wet woodland species that are currently missing. The table below lists appropriate additions to the ground flora which could be introduced to established planted areas.

Species	Latin name	Dry places	Wet places
Broad buckler-fern	Dryopteris dilatata		X
Creeping soft-grass	Holcus mollis		X
Foxglove	Digitalis purpurea	X	X
Honeysuckle	Lonicera periclymenum	X	X

Lady fern	Athyrium filix-femina		X
Lesser celandine	Ficaria verna	X	X
Lesser spearwort	Ranunculus flammula		X
Male fern	Dryopteris filix-mas	X	X
Marsh marigold	Caltha palustris		X
Marsh thistle	Cirsium palustre		X
Meadowsweet	Filipendula ulmaria		X
Moschatel	Adoxa moschatellina	X	
Primrose	Primula vulgaris	X	
Red campion	Silene dioica	X	X
Remote sedge	Carex remota		X
Soft rush	Juncus effusus		X
Sweet violet	Viola odorata	X	
Valerian	Valeriana officinalis		X
Wild angelica	Angelica sylvestris		X
Wood anemone	Anemone nemorosa	X	X
Wood sedge	Carex sylvatica	X	
Wood sorrel	Oxalis acetosella		X
Yellow-flag iris	Iris pseudocorus		X
Yellow pimpernel	Lysimachia nemorum		X

In the more formal parts of the park there are already a number of, mainly yew, hedges and single trees as arboretum specimens. Here, there is no need to plant with native species, but it is still prudent to consider species suited to the soils of the park.

Appendix 2
Design principles

[1] Table 8.1 of the London Plan (2021) and the map of Areas of Deficiency in Access to District Parks in the *Merton Green infrastructure, biodiversity and open space study* 2020.

[2] Wikipedia gives the areas of LB Merton and LB Wandsworth as 14.52 and 13.23 square miles (38 and 34 km^2) respectively and the respective populations are 207,000 and 330,000 respectively. A reasonable approximation for the population which finds Wimbledon Park the nearest District Park is 7/(38+34)*(207000+330000), or 52,000.

[3] See the my article in the Wimbledon Society Newsletter of September 2016 *The future of Wimbledon Park.* Buried away in the appendices to the 2018 Masterplan is a report on the consultation, including an analysis of the open-ended questions, which show that more than half the respondents used free-to-use facilities for informal sport, walking, children's play areas, running, cycling and picnics. Most park users were happy with the existing facilities and preferred their maintenance to replacing them with different facilities or adding new facilities.

[4] Because of this, estimates for the UK are that there has been and will be a net loss of carbon from UK forests: www.forestresearch.gov.uk/tools-and-resources/statistics/forestry-statistics/forestry-statistics-2018/uk-forests-and-climate-change-5/carbon-sequestration/

[5] This map was on display in the Wimbledon Museum, but given the wrong date and probably miss-attributed to Haynes, a surveyor who was active earlier in the century (*The Game Cover, Wimbledon Park.* Wimbledon Society Newsletter, March 2021. Dave Dawson).

[6] For example, see *The view that never was.* Wimbledon Society Newsletter, Sept 2018. Dave Dawson.

[7] *Lancelot 'Capability' Brown. A research impact review prepared for English heritage by the landscape group, University of East Anglia.* RESEARCH REPORT SERIES no. 50-2013.

[8] *Capability Brown's Wimbledon Park, a history.* Dave Dawson, 2016.

[9] *What remains of Capability Brown's woods.* Wimbledon Society Newsletter, June 2015. Dave Dawson.

[10] *Horse Close Wood Management Plan 2015.* Dave Dawson.

[11] *Ashen Grove Wood, 2018.* Dave Dawson.

[12] The natural regeneration includes Hawthorn, Elder, Cut-leaved elder, Bramble, Ti (Cordyline australis), Buddleia, Ash, Holly, Wild cherry, Evergreen oak, Ash, The field layer includes Caper spurge, White bryony, Round-leaved geranium, among other species.

[13] Oak, Hawthorn and Buddleia, with a few Hazel, Ash, Wild cherry, Cherry plum, Blackthorn, Evergreen oak, Dog rose, Bramble, Elder and Horse Chestnut. The fruit of most of these would have arrived in bird droppings every year but the seedlings have been allowed to survive by the cessation of mowing.