CAPABILITY BROWN'S WIMBLEDON PARK
A HISTORY

Dave Dawson

First draft, August 2016

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INTRODUCTION

The account begins with a description of the topography, soils and water regime of the park and then takes up the story of its development by describing what was there when Lancelot Brown began to landscape it in 1765. After describing the resulting landscape, I outline the major changes that have affected the park since. I end with a description of what is left today. I employ present-day names of historic features, but refer to the historic names on first mention. Readers should note that I use the term “the park” for Capability Brown’s park. I refer to the open space surviving today as the “heritage” land.

This history was prepared as part of the celebration of Lancelot (“Capability”) Brown’s tercentenary in 2016. I volunteered to correct and update an existing account prepared by Tony Matthews in 2015 for the Parks and Gardens UK website.

I thought that it would be an easy matter to cross-check details with the existing historical accounts of Wimbledon and Wandsworth and to examine historical maps of the area. In fact, checking the information proved to be difficult because there were many more sources than I had ever imagined and the source of many oft-repeated details was hard to track down. This draft was prepared in time for an exhibition on Brown held at the Museum of Wimbledon, and the unveiling of commemorative plaques at the various entrances to the heritage landscape.

Once I have completed my work, I plan to publish the final version later this year. As with any work of this kind, there were as many questions raised as answered. I have in preparation, also, a parallel document that details my discoveries and reasoning, to help others who may wish to check my account, or to take a topic further.

Preparing this has taught me a lot. The detective work has been great fun, and I hope that the result will help others to celebrate this historic park. I’m most grateful for the work of many others. I could not have begun the work without reference to the work of local historians Rita Ensing, Charles Toase, Richard Milward, Bernard Rondeau, Dorian Gerhold, Tony Matthews and Cyril Maidment.

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THE CAPABILITIES OF THE LANDSCAPE

Lancelot Brown landscaped Wimbledon Park. His great skill was in seeing the potential of an estate: describing its great 'capability' for improvement. Hence his nickname ‘Capability’ Brown.

The capabilities and traditional land use of Wimbledon Park were determined by its topography, soils and water supply, illustrated in the map of the geology and brooks on page.

The area that was landscaped by Lancelot Brown between 1765 and 1783 is outlined in red on the map.

The roads are those of the early 18th century, all of which date back to medieval times. In the west is the road from Wimbledon to Putney (Parkside today), connecting Wimbledon to The Portsmouth Road (today’s A3, near Tibbet’s Corner). In the east, is the road between Wandsworth and Merton (Merton and Durnsford Roads today).

The Black Park Gravel was deposited by the Thames in glacial times, 430,000 years ago. It forms a plateau 50 m above sea level in the west of the park. Its very infertile soil was used mainly as common land. Beneath the gravel is a water table perched on the impermeable clay below. Wells dug in the gravel could tap this water and gravel pits dug there flood.

The steep slopes down from the plateau are London Clay. This is moderately fertile, but sticky in winter and it dries out in summer. This made it less suited to arable crops and it was used mainly for pasture and woodland.

In the broad valleys below, the clay soils are more fertile and in places overlain by fertile, silty glacial Head Deposits. Here arable crops were grown. In the east, lush meadows provided a hay crop where the soils were the most fertile and moist. These were mainly outside the park on the late glacial Taplow Gravels and recent Alluvium.

Brooks originated at the eastern edge of the Black Park Gravel, where the perched water table reached the surface. These flowed east down the clay slopes towards the River Wandle. These brooks were dammed to form ponds for fish and for farm animals to drink from.

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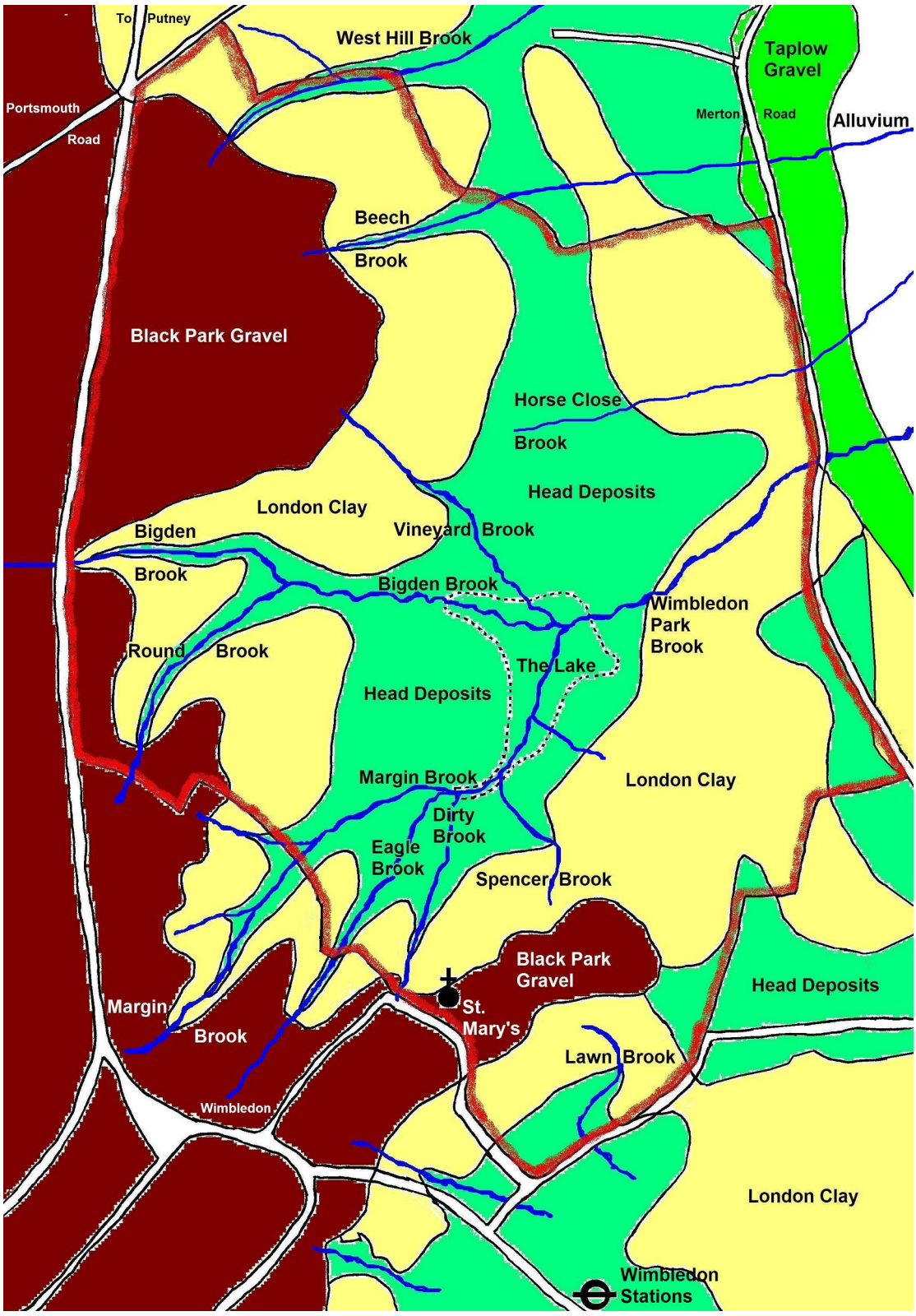

The Geology and brooks of Wimbledon Park[i]***.*** *The roads are the main roads of the early 18th Century, which still exist today. St Mary's Wimbledon is shown below centre and the present day Wimbledon Rail Stations at the bottom. The brooks flow down from the Black Park Gravel*[ii]*. A red border indicates the extent of the Park in 1780.*

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WIMBLEDON PARK IN 1764

In 1746, the richest schoolboy in England inherited the Marlborough Manor House and its 500 acre park. That youngster, only 11 years old, was John Spencer, who was to become the first Earl Spencer.

Model of the Marlborough Manor House (Museum of Wimbledon).

Surrounding the house were the formal gardens laid out in the French style in 1733 for his Great-grandmother, the dowager Duchess of Marlborough. Nearby was St Mary's Church and the Old Rectory.

The park was then already 160 years old, having been established by Thomas Cecil in Tudor times. Still standing out in the park were two remarkable avenues planted by Cecil. The Great Avenue ran from the site of the Tudor manor north across the park and on towards the Portsmouth Turnpike (near today's Tibbet's Corner). At right angles to that was Garratt Avenue, which ran east out of the park to the Merton Road. In Tudor times it continued on over the River Wandle to Garratt Lane.

The park was mainly pasture, where meandering brooks flowed and sheep grazed and there were several fish ponds.

There were three old woods in the park: Vineyard Hill Wood, The Coppice and Ash Plantation. Ashen Grove Wood may also have been in the park by then.

The park was ripe for improvement. Having built the house, the dowager Duchess of Marlborough actually preferred to live elsewhere. During the last 11 years of her life, this property fell into neglect.

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LAND PURCHASES FOR A LARGER PARK

John Spencer purchased, or enclosed, a good deal of land before he was ready to improve the park for his private pleasure.

In 1751, his trustees purchased Ashen Grove Farm.

When John was in his early 20s, in 1758, he purchased 214 acres of fields to the north of the park and enclosed some of Wandsworth West Common (outlined in red).

About the same time he also enclosed that part of Wimbledon Common that lay west of the present-day Parkside (outlined in pink). With this, he enlarged his park to 840 acres, an increase of 70% over what he had inherited. He was ready to spend big on improvements.

Over 20 years later, in 1782, well after completing the first stage of his improvements, he enclosed the rest of Wandsworth West Common (outlined in brown).

A triangle of land in the south-west of the park (outlined in grey) was ‘improved’ by 1768, but sold on to the owner of Wimbledon House, Parkside, before 1784.

By the early 1780s, towards the end of his life, Spencer’s purchases had nearly doubled the size of his inherited estate from about 500 acres to 925 acres and all the improvements were in place.

John, the First Earl, and Georgina the first Countess, Spencer

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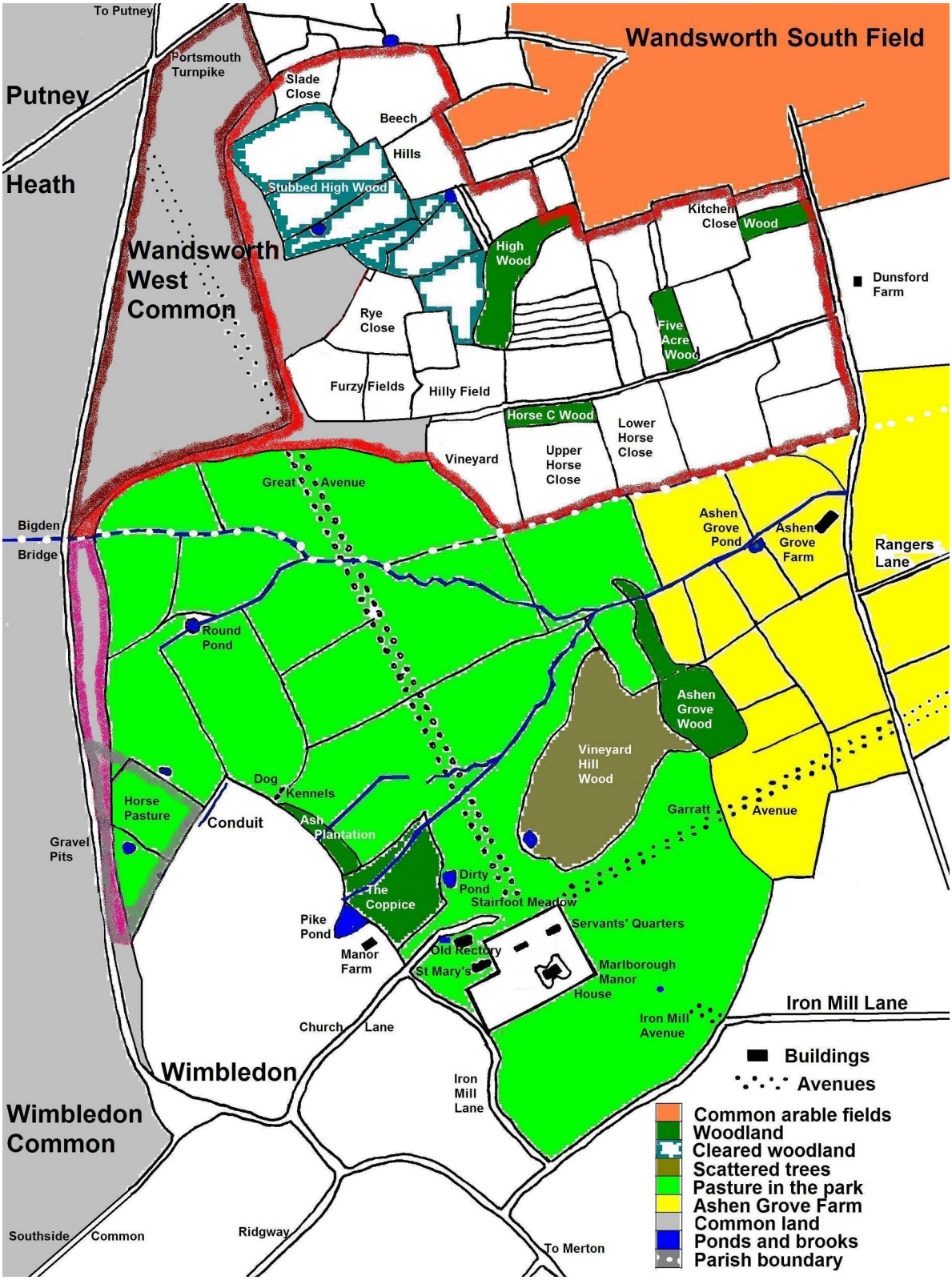

Wimbledon Park in the mid eighteenth century, when it was inherited by John Spencer[iii].

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THE LANDSCAPE

Lancelot Brown had ample room to find capabilities in the park. At 925 acres, Wimbledon Park was one of his largest commissions.

The improvements were done in two stages. Most were in place by the end of Brown's first Wimbledon Park commission of 1765-1766. The second commission began in 1779 and work was still in progress when both Brown and the first Earl Spencer died in 1783. The improvements came to an end then, but the second Earl inherited a mature landscape for a lifetime's enjoyment of his own. The improvements were typical of Brown's work elsewhere.

In the centre of the park, Brown created a 9 hectare Lake surrounded by "Greek and Roman" statues. The Lake was formed by damming the wide valley, fed by the Bigden and Margin Brooks. The confluence of the two brooks was submerged under some four metres of water. The banks were contoured to lead smoothly down to the water, but the landform was otherwise left natural. Although no edge was straight, the Lake could hardly be described as having the "sinuosity", characteristic of Brown's water bodies elsewhere.

The existing brooks, and their tributaries, were retained. Most of the ponds dated from before Brown's landscaping.

The majority of the park was pasture, divided by fences into three: the Middle Park, to the north of Halls Cover and the Lake; the Great Park to the west of the Lake; and the Vineyard Hill north of the Great Haha. To the east, the arable fields (managed from Ashen Grove Farm) were made larger. As was typical for Brown, there were no buildings in the pastoral parts of the park, apart from a boathouse at the south end of the Lake.

Within the pasture, any straight lines in the existing planting were removed. The formal gardens around the Marlborough Manor House were demolished and most of the trees in the avenues and hedgerows were felled. The replacement fences in the pasture followed curved lines, but those in the arable were straight, presumably to promote efficient cultivation.

The old woodlands in the arable area were all felled, but those adjacent to pasture were retained. A scatter of trees survived from the

previous straight lines and many more were planted. Some 50 new woodland clumps were planted. Around the periphery of the park, Brown planted his characteristic sinuous woodland belt with carriage drives within. The drives were designed to pass in and out of the woodland to surprise visitors with delightful views across the park every now and then.

Near the end of the work, in 1782, Spencer enclosed Wandsworth West Common and Brown developed it as a Game Cover with a pond and a Menagerie. Such game cover is unusual amongst Brown's work and it probably reflects Spencer's great enthusiasm for the shooting of game.

About the Marlborough Manor House, Brown created the huge Lawn, divided from the rest of the park by the Great Ha ha. Views from the house were south and east across the Lawn, with its two "temples", and on as far as the North Downs. As the house was near the south edge of the Black Park Gravel plateau, there was no view into the valley to the north and Brown planted large woodland clumps as a backdrop north of the house, further restricting the northern views.

Temple of Bellona, 1760, Kew, fashionable at the time.

Many more views were available to those on horseback or on foot. Also, for the less active, Brown designed prospects to be seen whilst seated in a light-weight chaise being driven along a gravel drive. A significant view, still able to be enjoyed today, was from the drive on the dam, looking south-west across the lake and pasture to the wooded slopes beyond and the spire of St Mary's Wimbledon. Other views across the lake and pasture were north-west from the drive between the house and Ashen Grove Wood; east from the drive running north through Great Park to the Old Lodge (then called "Park Road"; and south from a drive that ran between the dam and the east end of Horse Close Wood.

A few dissenters abhorred the loss of the previous formal landscape and Spencer had to buy out commoners rights. However, most visitors were enthusiastic about the new park in the latest fashion. How wonderful it was to be somewhere so close to the smoke, squalor and grime of London and yet to be able to enjoy a pastoral scene reminiscent of remote rural England. Brown had created a grand playground for eighteenth century nobles.

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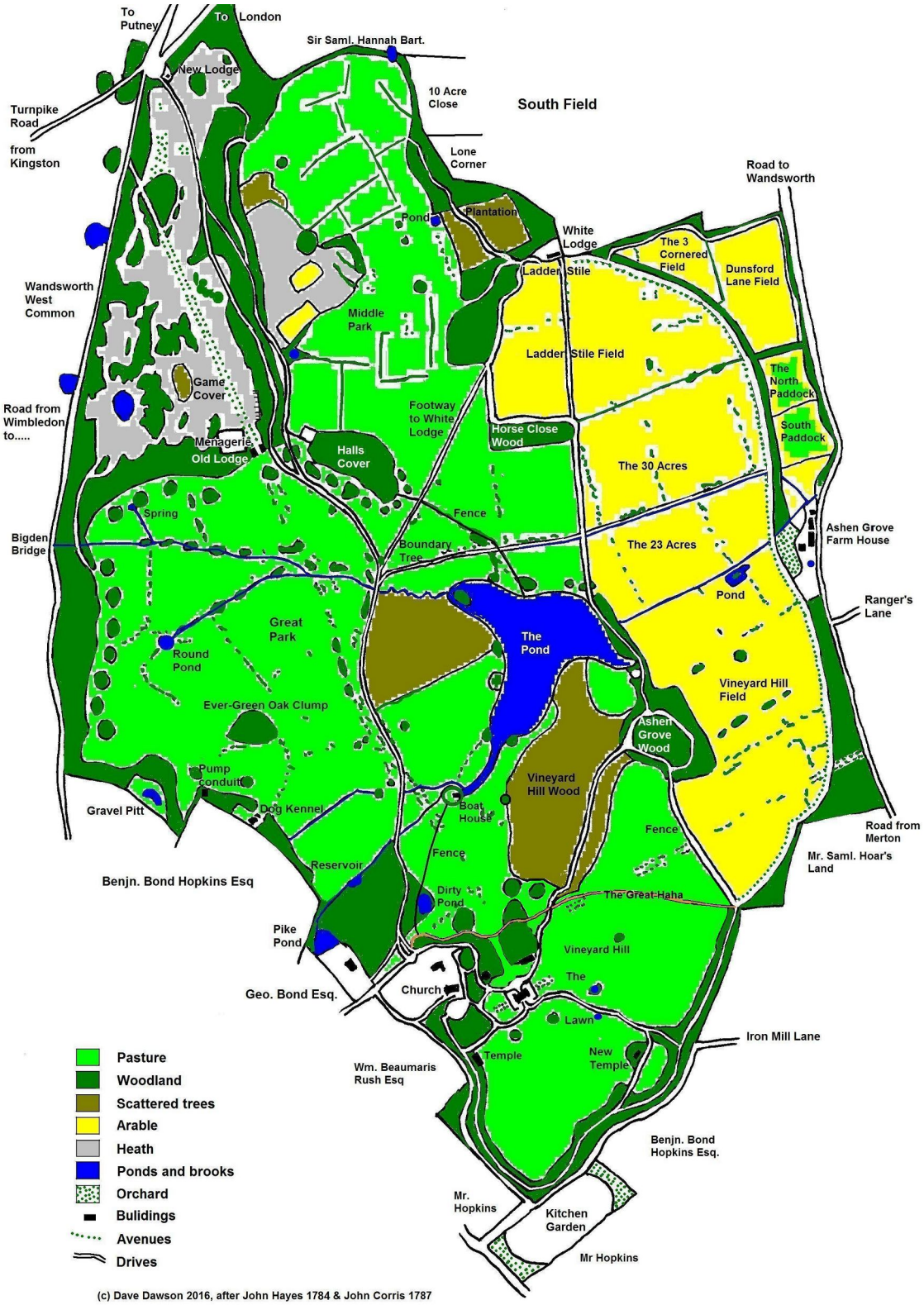
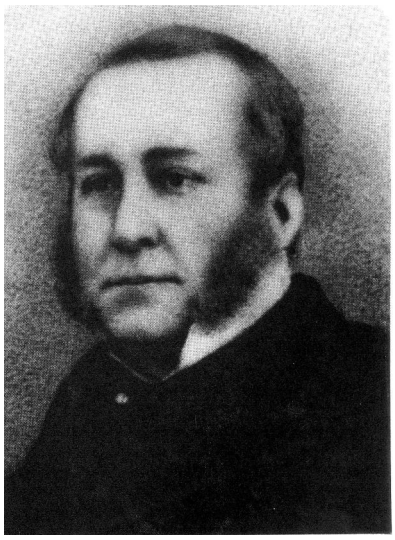


Wimbledon Park as landscaped by Lancelot Brown, 1782[iv].





George, the second Earl, Countess Lavinia and John Beaumont

VILLAS FOR THE CARRIAGE CLASSES

The Spencers were very wealthy, although they ran up extravagant debts. George, the second Earl was no exception: gambling, book collection and maintaining his properties progressively outran his income. In the 1820s he began to trim his expenses. Finally, in 1827, he became an absentee landlord. He leased the house to Lord Somerset and the park to Benjamin Patterson. Patterson managed it from Wimbledon Park Farm, once called Ashen Grove Farm.

Seven years later, George died and his son John became the third Earl, and took on the enormous debts. There was nothing for it but to sell his Wimbledon estate. A wealthy property developer, John Augustus Beaumont, had already purchased West Hill, the estate that bordered Wimbledon Park to the north. John sold him the northern part of the park in 1843, but died in 1845 whilst negotiating the sale of the rest. John's brother, Frederick, became fourth Earl and completed the sale in 1846. The Spencers' time as Wimbledon Park landowners was over.

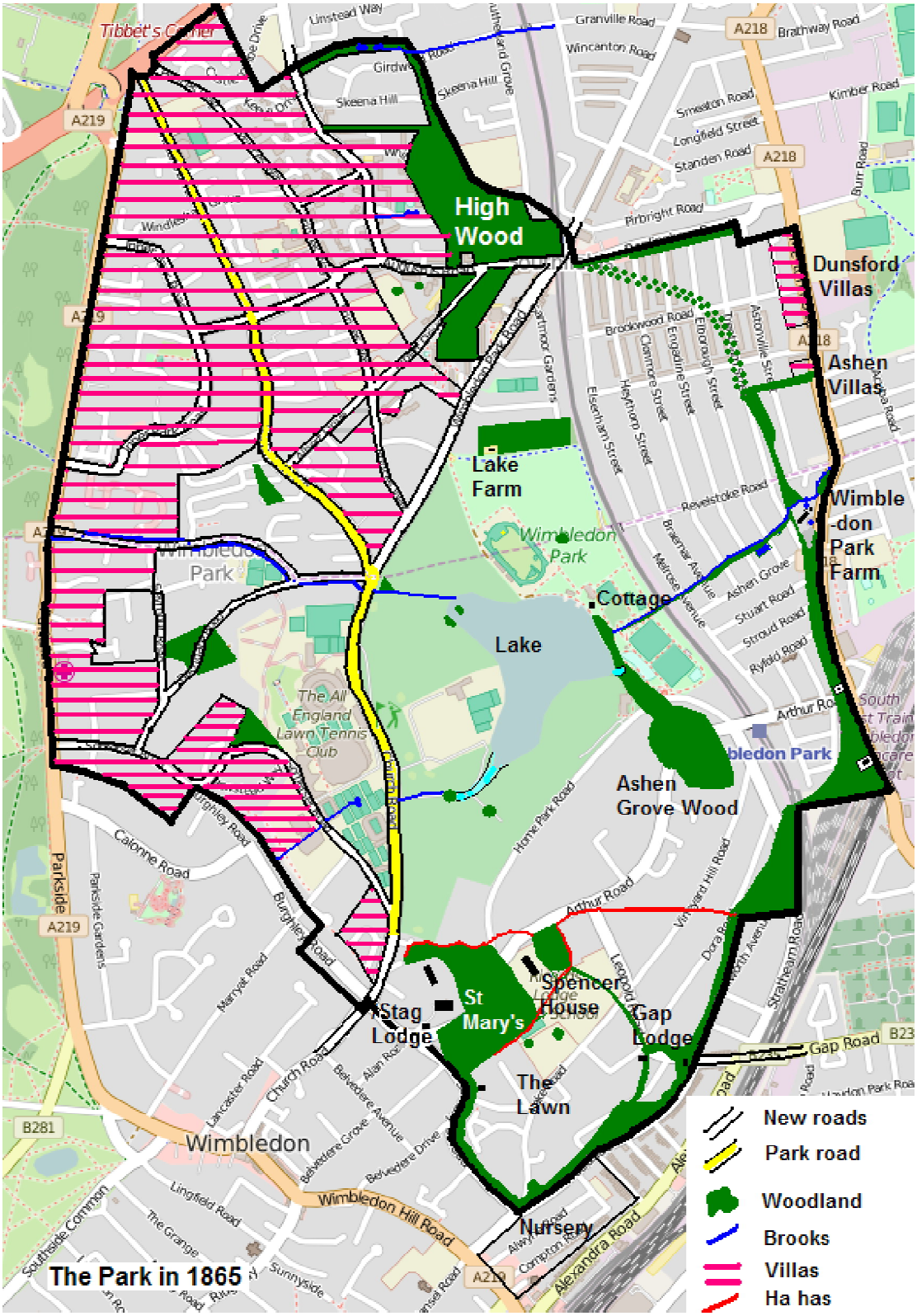
The railway between Vauxhall and Woking had been constructed to the south-west of the park in 1838, but remained little used because few could afford the fare and the service was infrequent. Those who couldn't afford a horse and carriage of their own could still find housing nearer to London. So, Beaumont's first development was for the carriage classes: those affluent city people who had carriages and who could afford stabling. They could travel to London via Putney Bridge.

The high ground in the west and north of the park was ideal for the large villas that Beaumont promoted. Most of the development was on the high Black Park Gravel terrace. As for access, Parkside was there

already. Beaumont upgraded the “Park Road” (now Church Road and Victoria Drive) and the old footpath to Wandsworth (now Wimbledon Park Road). Between these, he made up many more new roads. The map illustrates the situation in 1865, the time of the first good Ordnance Survey maps, and at the end of the great burst of villa construction.

The villas were substantial and the new properties were large, mostly between one and six hectares. Each had its driveway and landscaped garden and the largest were small private parks. However, most of Lancelot Brown’s design was on too grand a scale to fit the smaller frame, so his woodlands and drives survived only in those few places where they could be accommodated into the Victorian garden design. There was much new tree planting and over 25 new ponds, most of which were on the gravel plateau, so they filled with ground water, but West Hill and Beech Brooks were dammed to create further ponds.

To the East of the villa area, the park remained essentially untouched but now as farmland, not park. Beaumont lived in the Old Rectory, north of St Mary’s Church and Lord Somerset occupied the Spencer Manor House until his death in 1855. The Lawn and its “temples” remained. A new ha ha divided off Somerset’s rental land. It passed south and east of the manor house to join the older Great Ha ha north-east of the house. A new gate to the manor from Church Lane was now manned from a new lodge, today’s Stag Lodge. The perimeter woodland and drives in the south and east remained intact. The Lake remained, still surrounded by pasture to the west and arable land to the east. Bigden, Margin and Wimbledon Park Brooks still flowed above ground. Horse Close Wood, Ashen Grove Wood and High Wood remained. There was just a little development in the north-east of the park beside the Merton Road, a new cottage by the dam and Lake Farm, a new farmhouse intruding into Horse Close Wood. The perimeter woodland in the east had given way to the Woodman public house and a couple of other houses. Beaumont had added Gap Lodge to deter intruders from the adjacent Iron Mill Lane, later to be re-named Gap Road.



The Park in 1865, at the end of the villa building boom[v].

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THE LOWER CLASSES ARRIVE

Buoyed by his success in the west, but finding a slowdown there, Beaumont tried his luck elsewhere in the Park in the 1870s. He made up new roads in the southern part of the park around the manor house and Lawn. Although other land was being developed successfully outside the park, around Wimbledon Station to the south, the uptake around Beaumont's new roads was slow. Only the part of Arthur Road west of Ashen Grove Wood on the Black Park Gravel plateau was lined by villas by the turn of the century.

Seeking better public transport links to his land, Beaumont sponsored the construction of the District Railway (today's District Line) and sold land cheaply to the railway company. Beaumont died in 1886, three years before the rail line opened to provide stations at Southfields and Wimbledon Park. The park came to his daughter, later Lady Lane. She lived in Suffolk and was interested only in making money from her Wimbledon land holdings. She had to wait, however, until working families and the burgeoning middle classes could no longer find housing more accessible to London.

Thirty years after the villa boom of the 1850s, the market finally picked up in the flat lands of the east of the Park. The roads made up in 1870 began to fill and the huge "grid" to the east of the District Railway was developed quickly, between 1895 and 1910.

The map shows the situation around 1910. All but the inaccessible, low and flood-prone heart of Lancelot Brown's park had been displaced by suburbia. Other land that was less economical to develop included the northern part of High Wood, and a large field adjoining it. The uphill part of Ashen Grove Wood had been displaced by villas, the peripheral woodland in the "grid" and around the south of the park was all gone and little remained of Brown's plantings around the manor house. Plans had already been drawn up for further roads, and the land was all divided up into plots for sale. It looked as if Lancelot Brown's park would all soon disappear.

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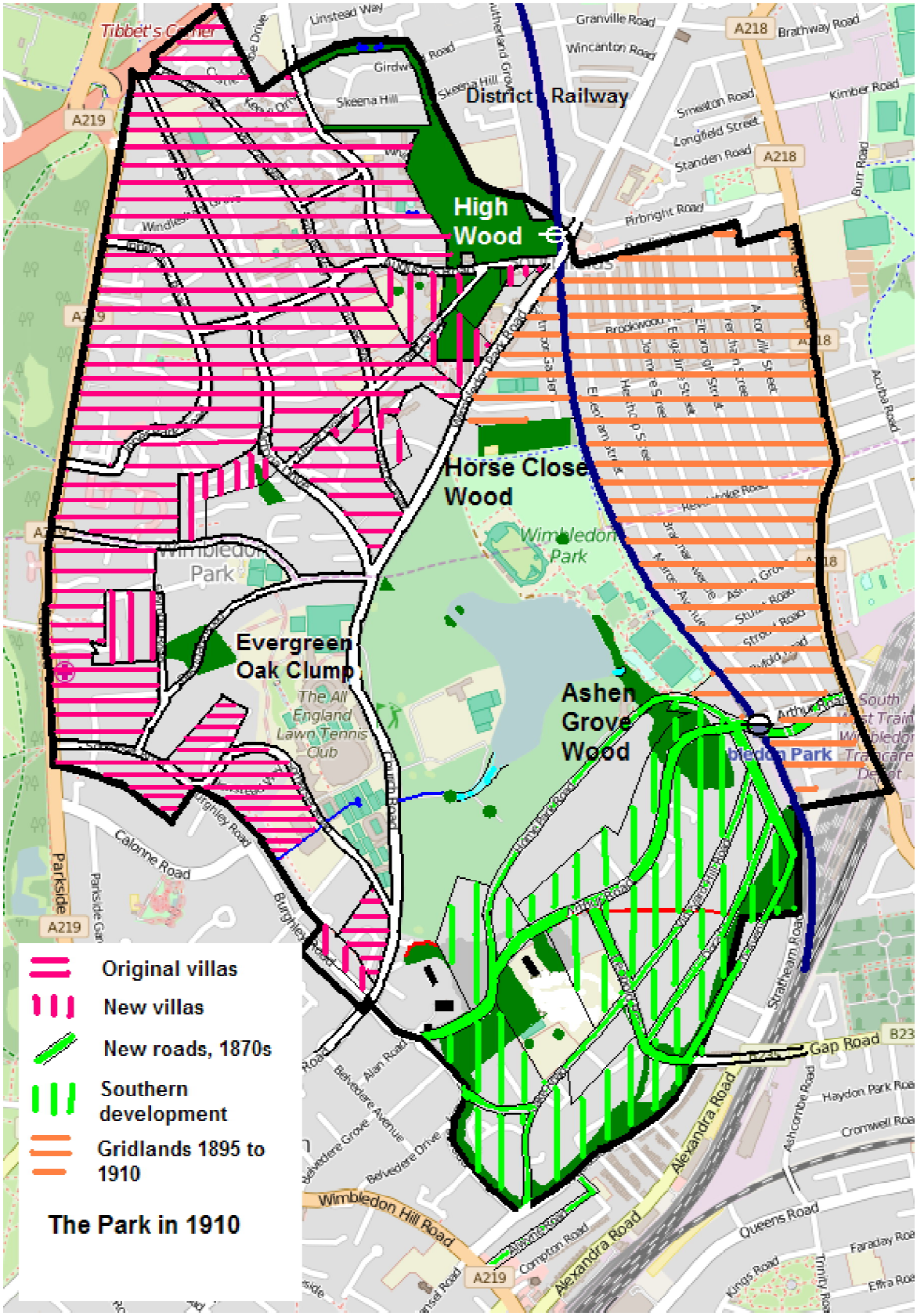

The Park in 1910, after the building boom for the new middle classes and tradesmen.

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THE HERITAGE

Wimbledon Park has special historic interest. The part of the park that was saved is listed in Historic England's Register of Historic Parks and Gardens.

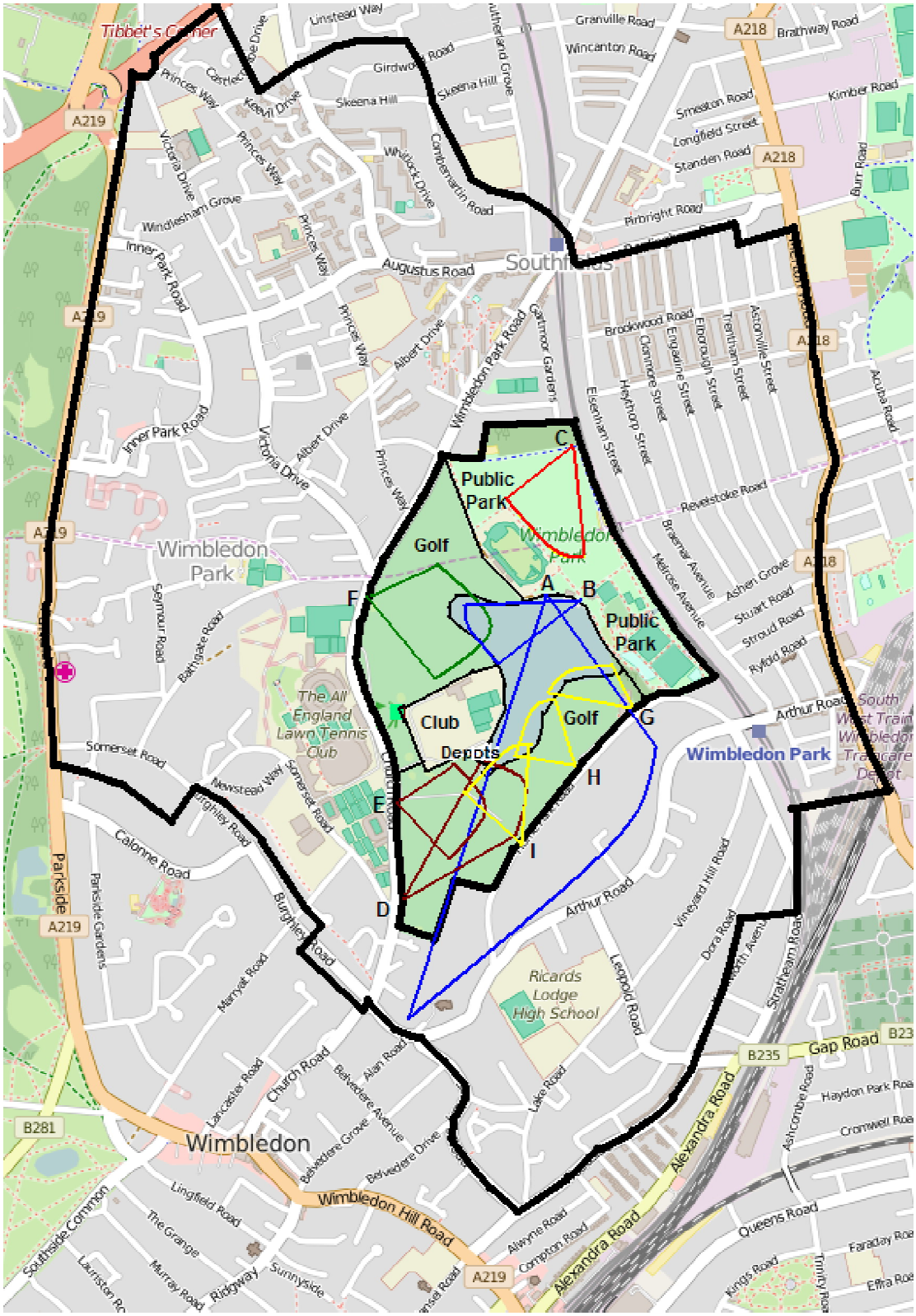
Who saved this heritage land? We can thank the Wimbledon Club, who purchased their property in 1899 and the Municipal Borough of Wimbledon, who purchased the bulk of the land in 1915 for public use.

The Golf Course comprises half of the heritage land, which Merton Council sold to the All England Lawn Tennis Club as freehold in 1993.

Four main features underlie the heritage status: the Lake in its grassland setting, the old woodlands, the veteran trees and the historic views from Capability Brown's drives.

Views. The first map shows historic views that survive today.

- The best of these is view "A" from the dam south across the Lake and Golf Course to the wooded slope of Vineyard Hill and the spire of St. Mary's Wimbledon on the horizon.
- In contrast, the views west and north from the dam (B) across the Lake are curtailed by the hedge around the stadium and compromised by the ugly buildings of the Wimbledon Club on the far side of the lake, with the tops of the Wimbledon tennis court buildings beyond.
- A previous long view south to the Lake from the eastern end of Horse Close Wood (C), and continuing as in "A", is now curtailed by the hedge around the stadium, the Sailing Base building and the Bowls Pavilion.
- Other historic views (D-F) are from Church Road, which follows the line of the drive which ran from the house north through Great Park. These look east across the bottom of the broad valley to the Lake and are constrained by planting on the Golf Course, the screening around the Wimbledon Club and the untidy lakeside depots of the Golf and Wimbledon Clubs.
- Views north-west from the drive that ran from the house through Vineyard Hill Wood to Ashen Grove Wood are lost. Further down the hill are views (G-I) from Home Park Road that provide limited replacement. Unpleasant concrete boundary fences, and obstructive vegetation at viewpoints combine with the ugly depots, and lakeside buildings of the Wimbledon Club and the Sailing Base to mar this potentially good view.



Historic views in and around the heritage land today.

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Trees and woodland (second map)

The most remarkable survival in the heritage land is Horse Close Wood, which is a plantation of Ash, Oak and Elm, at least 350 years old and still today much the same shape as it was when first mapped in 1742. The ancient wood of the park, Ashen Grove Wood, has fared less well. The bulk of it, that ran uphill across Home Park Road, was lost to housing in the 20th century. The surviving northern fragment spans the boundary between the Golf Course and public park and has suffered from attrition and neglect.

Both woods, however, continue to play a role in the landscape, framing the views as they did in Brown's design. They are valuable for biodiversity conservation.

The oldest trees in Ashen Grove Wood are around 200 years old, but Horse Close Wood has two veteran oaks with estimated ages over 300 years, so predating Brown, and a further seven oaks which began life around Brown's time. Outside the woodland, more veteran trees survive, all of them oaks.

The oldest are two ancient trees, estimated as 500 years old, so they were seedlings in Henry VIII's reign. One is in the Golf Course near the western corner of the Wimbledon Club and the other is in Smithwood Close, 100 metres east of Victoria Drive. These two are of outstanding historic, landscape and biodiversity value.

There are a further three trees dating from before Brown's time: one on the Golf Course and two near Victoria Drive. Ten or so oaks might have been planted by Brown. Four of these are outside the heritage land and two on its boundaries. Sadly, one of these, which was by Church Road died this year following years of abuse and neglect. The rest are on the Golf Course.

Two of Brown's clumps of trees survive on the Golf Course: both are of oaks. One originally surrounded the boat house at the end of the southern arm of the Lake. Nowadays, it's surrounded by a circular ditch. The other lies 100 metres away to the south-west.

These clumps, and the ancient and veteran trees in the heritage land mark it out as an historic landscape and are to be treasured. They are also important for biodiversity conservation, as they provide habitat for a great range of specialist animals and fungi.

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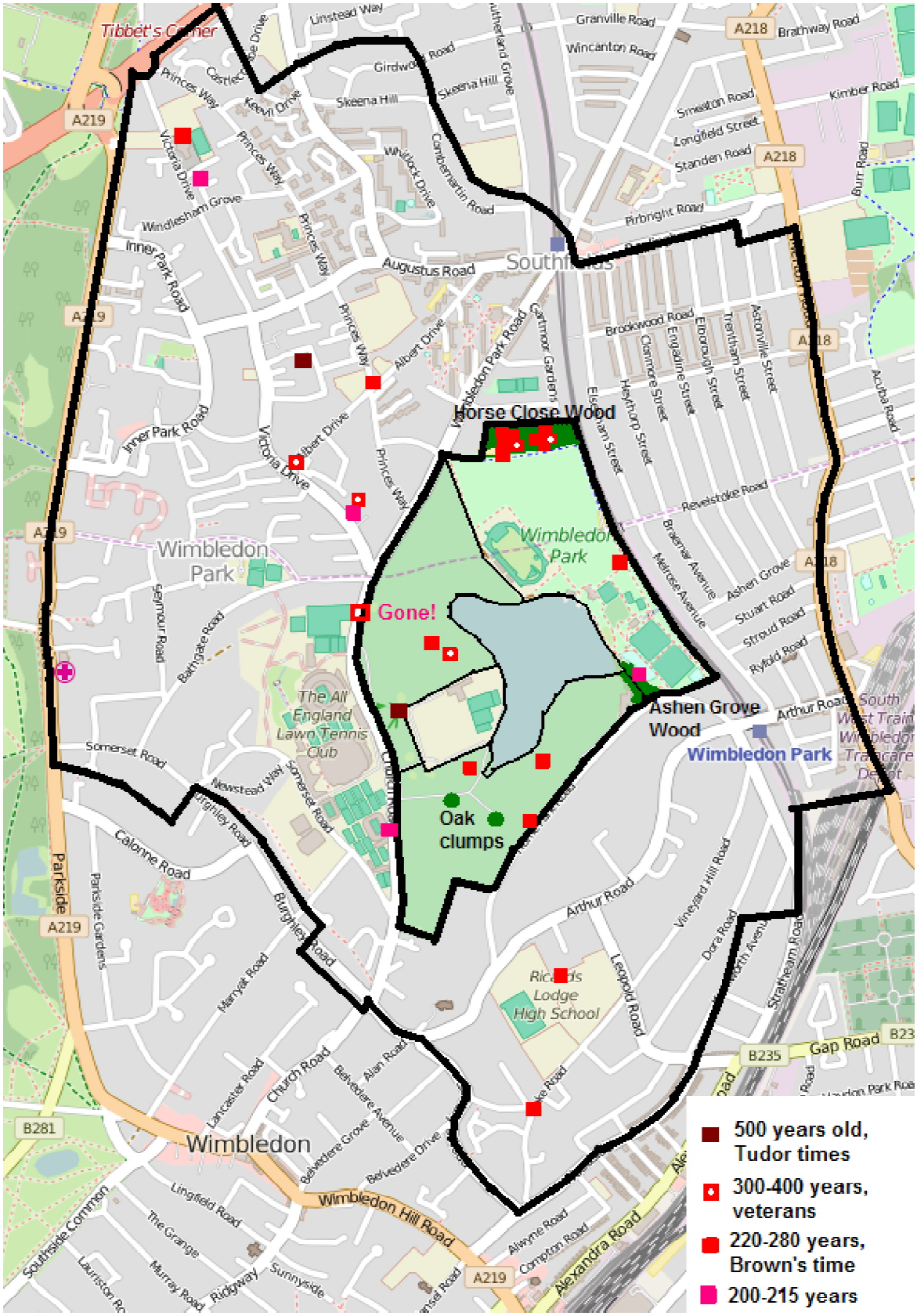

Surviving old woodlands and veteran trees.

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The Lake

Brown's Lake survives more or less intact and within a grassland setting, albeit the mown amenity grass of the Golf Course and Public Park. The curved end of its southern arm was infilled in the mid 20th century: a small area, but a significant loss to Brown's original design.

The Lake is the largest water body south of the Thames in this quarter of London. From the outset, it has been a fishery, and this continues today. It also supports much water life, with emergent water plants around much of its margin. It has water lilies and variable amounts of water weed below the surface. In recent years the water lilies and water weeds have been greatly reduced, perhaps because of pollution events. A good range of wetland and water birds use these habitats, and the flying insects that emerge from the water attract Swifts, House Martins and several species of bat.

Views across the water are enhanced by this rich water life and also by the effects of wind and light on the water. This gives a lovely, natural and changing aspect to the lake.

Echos of Brown, today

Planting by the three owners of the heritage land, and by the surrounding householders, has partially replaced some lost features. The view across the Lake towards the spire of St Mary's looks at a wooded hill, where the planting is so dense and mature that the suburban houses there are mainly out-of-sight. Within the heritage land itself there are avenues, woodland and hedgerows around the periphery. These provide a back-drop to views. The wooded strip along Church Road mimics the lost peripheral woodland by providing glimpses of the view down to the Lake. Views towards central London are limited by the wooded tube embankment and the hedgerows on the eastern edge of the park. Some of the planting and the naturally regenerated trees have provided new clumps of trees, especially around the perimeter of the Lake. Although younger than Brown's trees, some of these trees are sufficiently old to have holes suitable for nesting birds and roosting bats, and amongst them will be found the veteran trees of the future. The short length of the brook that's above ground in the public park supports a range of water plants. So the views across grassland and water are still enclosed by natural peripheral woodland and dotted by clumps of trees. The essence of Brown's design lives on.

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500 year old oak on the Golf Course

The view today from the dam towards St Mary's Wimbledon

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Stamford. 1862. *South-west London in 1862.* Reproduced by Wandsworth Historical Society.

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[i] The main source is the geological map (Geological Survey of Great Britain 1981). Terminology of the Geological layers, is updated according to the The BGS Lexicon of Named Rock Units: http://www.bgs.ac.uk/Lexicon/home.cfm. The position of the brooks is based upon contour maps, the fluvial deposits shown on the geological map, Environment Agency online surface water flood risk maps and some ground survey.

[ii] I could find no names for these brooks so, wherever possible, have adopted names from features associated with them on the early maps.

[iii] This is based upon a 1742 plan of the Downe & Dunsford Manors (Ensing 1985,1987), Rocque (1746), figure 33 of Gerhold (1998) and map 4.1 of Milward & Maidment (2010). Some details, that are judged as earlier than the map date, are from Richardson (1768), Hayes (1784) and Corris (1787). It was only later, in 1765, that John was made the first Earl Spencer.

[iv] Based mainly upon the map by Hayes (1784), with some details from Corris (1787).

[v] Based mainly upon the first good Ordnance Survey maps, with information also from Stamford's map of South-west London in 1862.

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