

Trees in Heritage Wimbledon Park

Dave Dawson¹, March 2019

Summary

The historic and present distribution of the trees and woodland is mapped.

Some 60 veteran trees are valuable as heritage and landscape features and as a rare habitat for other wildlife. One old English Oak dates back to 1500 and another to 1670, but most old trees (all of them oaks) were planted by Lancelot Brown in the landscaping of 1765 and a smaller number up until 1827, when the Earls Spencer became absentee landlords. After 1827, trees were lost as the landscape was farmed and, around 1800, when sports use began. Then, trees were planted to landscape sports areas and the public park. Others regenerated naturally in areas that were not mown.

Brown kept some existing woodland and planted much more. Surviving from before Brown, Ashen Grove Wood is an Ancient Woodland and Horse Close Wood is an old planted wood. These old woods are important in the same way as the veteran trees. They also have natural woodland soils which support distinctive shrubs and ground flora. A more recent woodland is nevertheless a national priority habitat, the wet woodland of the lake edge. This developed over the last 150 years. Sadly, except beside the Wimbledon Club, this is now depleted. Another lakeside wood, Owl Copse, results from the cessation of mowing around 100 years ago. All lakeside trees are important habitat, because they shelter the lake from wind and light pollution, which provides suitable conditions for bats and other animals. They also screen unsightly development from view, so enhancing the landscape. Too much shade harms lakeside emergent vegetation, so there is a benefit from having some parts of the lakeside free of large trees.

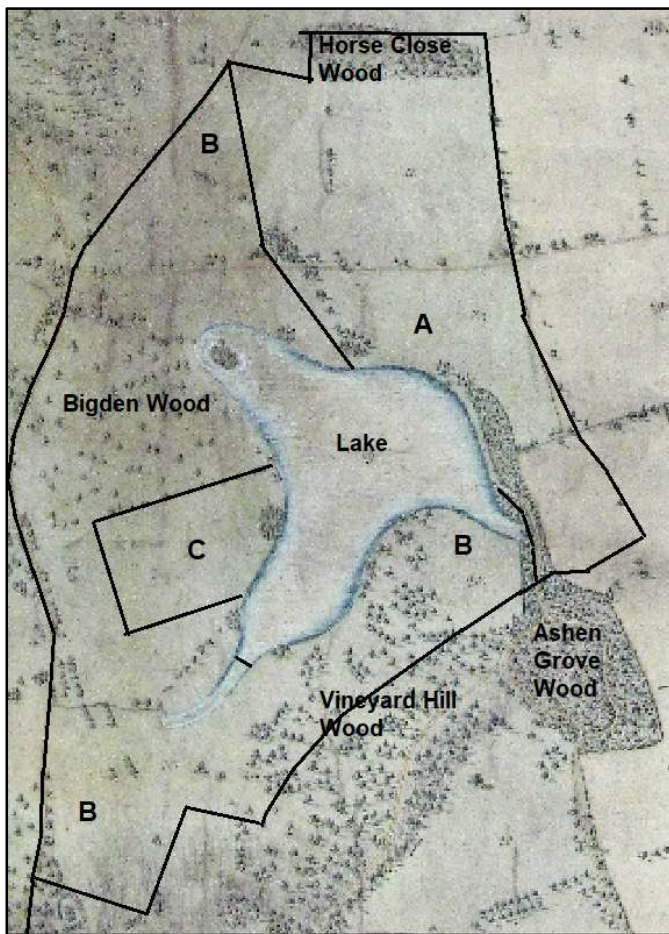
Around the edges of the heritage landscape, hedgerows, avenues and woodland strips have been planted (and also regenerated from lack of mowing on parts of the golf course). These younger trees serve to replace the lost perimeter woodland of Lancelot Brown's landscape.

Trees and woodland are not static features, so it's important that some younger trees are retained for succession to become the landscape features and veterans of the future. It's also important to retain and enhance the older woodlands as habitat and to ensure continuity of woodland soils and the life they support.

Introduction

This note was prepared to assist those working for the future of Heritage Wimbledon Park². It provides information on the role of the trees, clumps of trees, shrubs and woodland in the heritage landscape. Heritage Wimbledon Park is a remnant of Earl Spencer's Wimbledon Park, landscaped by Lancelot ('Capability') Brown in the 1760s. The remnant is a Grade II* heritage landscape on account of this history³ but is considered to be at risk⁴. This note identifies the trees and woodlands that provide significant amenity value through their contribution to the present-day landscape as survivors from the Spencers' park and also those that have come about since those times.

History⁵



The map to the left is an excerpt from Richardson's map of 1768, two years after the completion of Brown's first contract, with the approximate position of present-day boundaries of the heritage landscape superimposed. To the east is the 27ha public park (A)⁶, which includes the 9 ha lake in the centre. Adjoining the western and southern edges of the lake is the crescent, 30 ha Wimbledon Park Golf Course (B), owned by the All England Lawn Tennis Club⁷. Surrounded by the golf course, and adjoining the western edge of the lake, is the 6 ha Wimbledon Club⁸ (C).

Central to Lancelot Brown's design was his new lake, which remains central to the heritage landscape today, and little changed. Brown's park was bounded by perimeter woodland belts and avenues, which lay beyond the boundaries of today's heritage site. All of this

perimeter is now lost to suburban development as are many areas of woodland, trees and clumps of trees. Within today's heritage land, Brown retained two pre-existing woodlands. Horse Close Wood survives today, little changed, at the northern edge of the heritage site. The larger Ashen Grove Wood extended from the position of the present day Watersports Centre south along Brown's new dam and up onto the eastern end of Vineyard Hill. This is largely lost, but a small area remains, split between the childrens' play area in the public park and the adjacent part of the golf course. Most of Brown's park was grazed pasture, but there was arable land east of the lake. Within both of these, Brown removed most of the trees of the previous straight avenues (the map shows remnants of the Great Avenue in the south-west of the golf course), but retained the two woodlands, some hedgerows in the eastern,

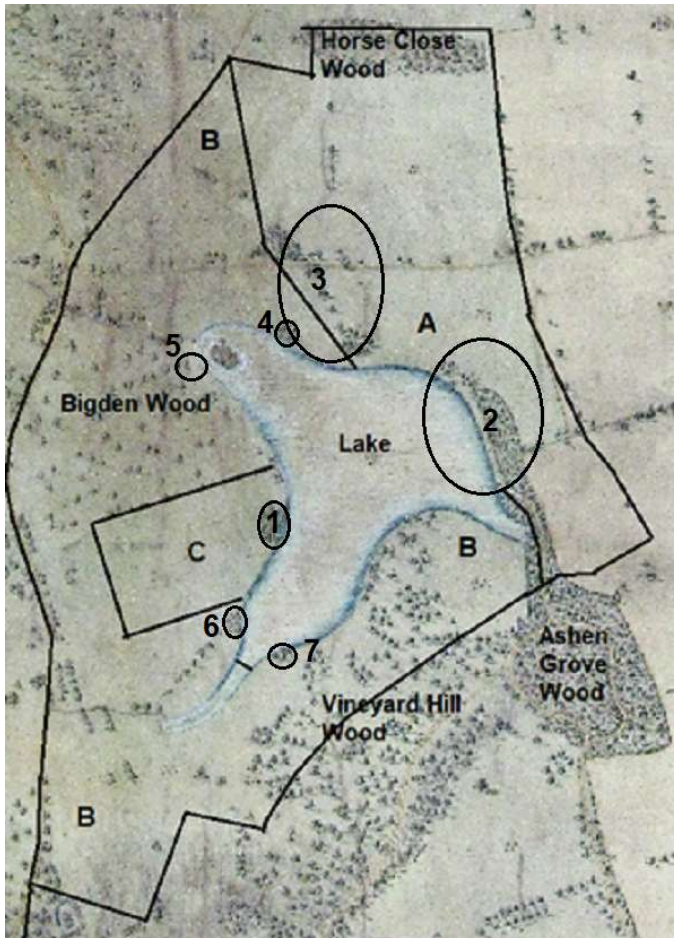
arable, part of the park and individual trees and clumps of trees, and he planted many more of both⁹. Richardson's map shows these. The parkland trees were particularly numerous in two areas: Bigden¹⁰ wood was east of the drive that's Church Road today, north of The Wimbledon Club and west of the lake; Vineyard Hill Wood was south of the lake on the hill slope west of Ashen Grove Wood.

The Earls Spencer used the park for a further 60 years, until 1827, when they became absentee landlords and the park was leased as farmland. In 1846, farmland use of the heritage landscape continued under the new owner, J.A. Beaumont, and then his daughter, Lady Lane, until the 1890s. The woods and hedgerows survived in the farmland, but some trees died without being replaced and grazing prevented most natural woody regeneration. Photographs from around 1890¹¹ (below) show mature trees, but fewer of them, and thinner clumps than do the maps of 100 years before¹².



In the 1890s, radical changes began. Use changed from farming to sports: polo across the north and cricket at The Wimbledon Club came first, and golf later. The Wimbledon Club arrived in 1889 and most other boundaries were established by the Municipal Borough of Wimbledon and its successors following the purchase of the rest of the heritage land in 1915¹³.

So, 150 years after Brown's landscaping, grazing was replaced by mowing¹⁴. The short-lived trees and shrubs from Brown's planting had been lost and attrition of the longer-lived trees continued, but the change of use caused many extra losses. The map on the next page shows the major losses. In the Wimbledon Club, a clump of pines beside the lake (1) was lost. In the public park the northern end of Ashen Grove Wood (2) was lost, as were most of the hedgerow trees, and clumps of trees in the area of the present-day stadium (3). In the golf course, trees were removed to make way for fairways and four lakeside clumps were lost (4-7). New trees and



shrubs were planted as the owners developed their facilities. Some were planted as features in the new landscapes to provide an arboretum. Others were to shelter and screen facilities: those surrounding the Wimbledon Club and the running track in the public park. Trees lost their browse lines and those that had been pollarded¹⁵ in the parkland and farmland began to grow taller.

Other trees arrived by natural regeneration in places not touched by the regular mowing. Such self-established trees and shrubs provided a new perimeter woodland belt around much of the heritage landscape. Owl Copse, on the Bigden Wood lakeside, had a similar origin about 100 years ago. Somewhat earlier, a narrow band of wet woodland established on edges of the lake: a woodland type that's rare in London¹⁶ and which was previously prevented from growing by grazing. The photograph from

around 1980 (below) shows the wet woodland on the southern boundary of the lake,

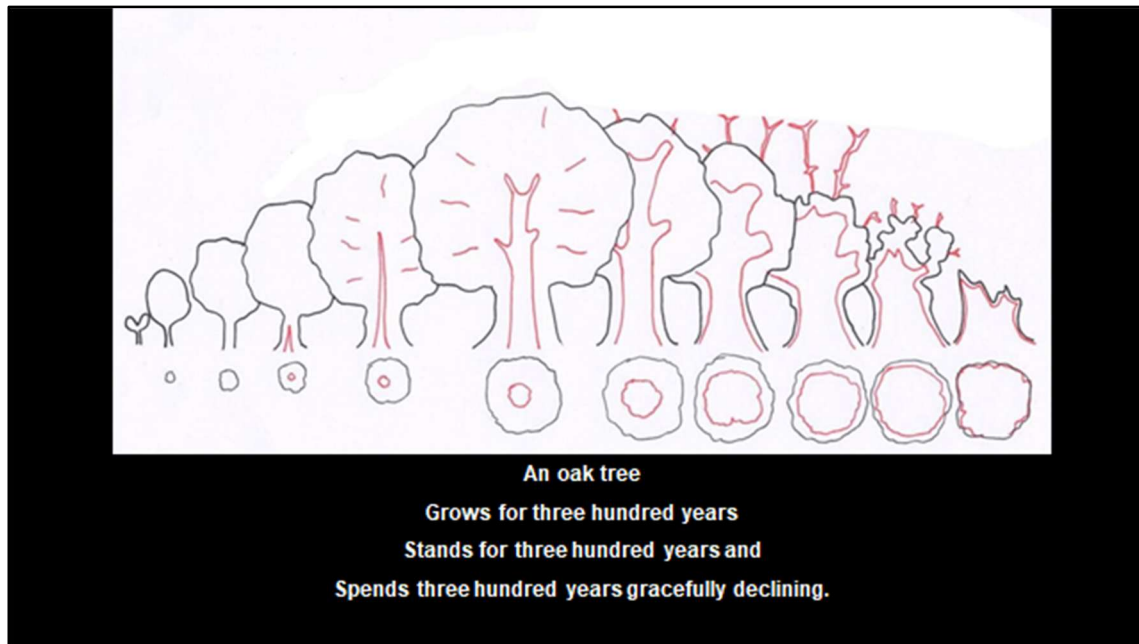


since cleared by the golf club. In the In the 1990s, new hedgerows were planted on the eastern boundary of the public park parallel to the tube line embankment.

As a result, now, most of the trees are 150 years or less in age and reflect as many years of sports management.

The trees now: importance and risk

The map shows the veteran¹⁷ trees, woodlands and main clumps and avenues.



Trees, shrubs and woodland are vital components of the present value of the heritage landscape. Reflecting this, the whole heritage landscape is designated as a Conservation Area and as Metropolitan Open Land. The golf course, lake, Horse Close Wood and the hedgerows on the eastern boundary are a Site of Borough Importance for nature conservation (Grade I). This site is important, among other things, for its trees and woodland and the habitat that they provide for other wildlife, notably uncommon invertebrates¹⁸, birds¹⁹ and bats²⁰.

Despite the importance of trees in the heritage landscape for amenity, historic value and as habitat of rare, protected and specially protected species, the existing designations have not provided adequate protection, and tree clearance has been undertaken without notice nor consultation²¹.

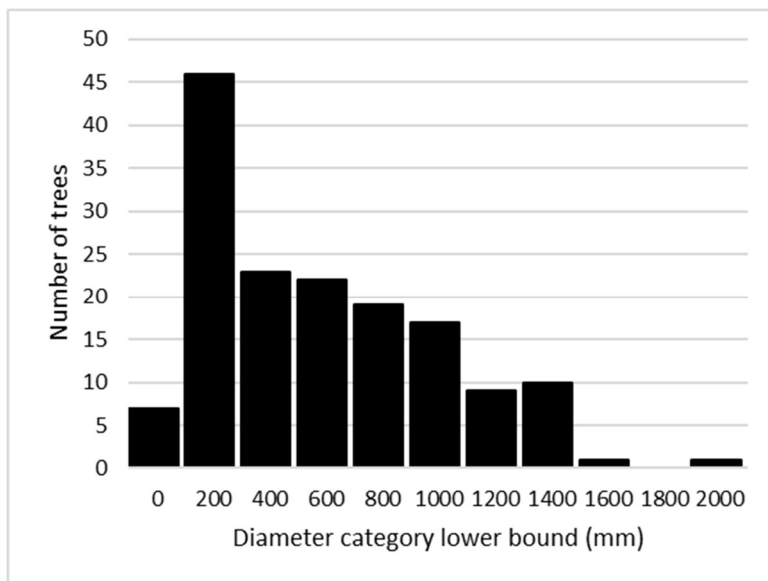
Because of the need to balance the value of the trees against considerations of landscape design and public use and safety, the London Borough of Merton keeps a database of trees in the public park. Also, the part of the park that could be affected by flood control works was surveyed in 2018. There have been two surveys of trees on the golf course: by the then leaseholder, the Wimbledon Park Golf Club, and the owner, the All England Lawn Tennis Club²². Further information on the trees comes from the author's work on the veteran trees, and from his surveys undertaken for the new London flora²³.

The heritage landscape has been included in an at risk register²⁴ due to uncertainty around the future, the impacts of divided ownership on landscape management, obscured designed views and the deteriorating condition of the lake. The main uncertainty is the future of the golf course now that the club's lease has come to an end. Although the Metropolitan Open Land designation should prevent most built development, the trees and woodland of the golf course could be in the way of permissible open space uses and so at risk. The main features obscuring the designed views are the intrusive buildings near the lake edge of all three owners²⁵, and the tall dense hedgerows around the stadium in the public park and The Wimbledon Club. The formal lines of these hedgerows are out of keeping with

Brown's design. Views from outside the site are obscured by dense hedges at the northern tip of the golf course and by woodland on the golf course boundary with Home Park Road. Before the recent radical clearances, the wet woodland on the edge of the lake also obscured some views²⁶. Unfortunately, the opportunity was not taken to retain some of the wet woodland to replace trees and clumps of trees that were lost to make way for sports use, nor to screen ugly features from view.

The golf course

On the golf course the most important trees are the veteran English Oaks and the half of Ashen Grove Wood on the course. Ashen Grove Wood is described in a separate report²⁷, which is summarised separately below.



There are some 40 veteran trees on the golf course, listed under the tree numbers of the AELTC report in Appendix I. The oldest is a Tudor Oak (T434), situated near the west corner of The Wimbledon Club. This is around 500 years old.

Although the two tree surveys of the golf course take good account of the

veteran trees and their care, tree planting and works have affected landscape and nature conservation amenity on the golf course. The AELTC report notes some examples of poor tree care in the past, trees were removed from one of Brown's designed clumps without following the S211 procedure and extensive clearance has been undertaken of the valuable wet woodland on the lake margin. Most of the original trees have been lost by attrition and not replaced one-for-one. Photographs from the 1890s show that the tree cover had been depleted in comparison with Richardson map. Tree planting has been confined to the roughs and other areas away from the fairways, so it has not respected Lancelot Brown's design. The habitat of protected species of animal has been harmed by removal of ivy, pruning and the failure to acknowledge the values of young trees and woodland. Some of these effects are doubtless the consequence of works necessary for safety, but others doubtless could have been avoided. It is hoped that this review of the values will help to obviate such concerns in future.

National Planning Policy Framework, revised 2018. Development resulting in the loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habitats (such as ancient woodland and ancient or veteran trees) should be refused, unless there are exceptional reasons and a suitable compensation strategy exists.

¹ Dave is an applied scientist, specialising in ecology, ecological methods and nature conservation.

² The term “Heritage Wimbledon Park” is employed to distinguish the area listed by Historic England from several other uses of “Wimbledon Park”. The boundaries of the heritage site are shown on Figure 1.

³ <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1000852> Beware, however, that this listing depends upon historical sources that are not everywhere reliable.

⁴ When it was added to the at risk register, in 2016, this was said to be due to “uncertainty about the park’s future; the impacts of divided ownership on landscape management; views of the original designed landscape being obscured; and the deteriorating condition of the lake. Inclusion in the register implies no criticism of the owners, many of whom are actively seeking ways to secure the future. The aim of the register is to keep attention focused on the park, to act as a working tool to help define the scale of the problem and to prioritise action by ourselves, local authorities, preservation trusts, funding bodies and others who can play a part in securing the future of these irreplaceable landscapes.” The risk website gives assessments: Generally unsatisfactory condition with major localised problems. High vulnerability and declining trend.

⁵ The history of the 18th century park is described in the booklet: *Capability Brown’s Wimbledon Park, a history*. Dave Dawson, August 2016. The 18th century park was around 375 ha, 15% of which survives. This comprises the 29 ha public park (including the lake) and 4 ha Wimbledon Club as well as the 30 ha golf course. The Richardson map of 1768 shows the park two years after the completion of Lancelot Brown’s first landscape contract. On the plan below, the approximate boundaries of the present-day ownership are imposed on an excerpt from the Richardson map.

⁶ This, and the pre-existing golf course and Banky Field on the hill slope south-east of Home Park Road, were purchased from Lady Lane by the Wimbledon Corporation in 1915. The golf course was leased to the golf club and the facilities of the public park were financed by the sale of Banky field for housing development in the 1920s.

⁷ The land was part of the purchase by the Wimbledon Corporation in 1915 and the golf club had a long lease from the Corporation, and latterly from LB Merton, until sale of the land to the All England Lawn Tennis Club in the 1980s. AELTC bought out the lease in December 2018.

⁸ The club originated as a cricket club playing on Wimbledon Common in the last half of the nineteenth century. They moved to the present site as tenants of Lady Lane in 1889 and purchased the land from her in 1899, so becoming the first sporting owner in the heritage landscape 16 years before the Wimbledon Corporation (www.thewimbledonclub.co.uk/cricket/info/history). Hockey came early also, again with a move from Wimbledon Common. The club was founded in 1883 and moved to the cricket club ground at the end of the nineteenth century (www.thewimbledonclub.co.uk/hockey-about-us).

⁹ Brown’s tree and shrub plantings were protected from grazing animals by fencing until sufficiently established to withstand grazing and browsing.

¹⁰ My name, based upon the historic name for the bridge on Parkside.

¹¹ I’m grateful to the Wimbledon Park Angling Club for providing this and other historic photographs. This photograph shows the new villas along Arthur Road on the skyline, and none on Home Park Road. This, and the buildings of the cricket club on the western lakeside are all shown on the OS map London XIV.NE, and date the photograph to before 1893-4 when the map was revised. As the cricket club moved from the common to the lakeside in 1889, the photograph should be around 1890.

¹² Apart from Richardson’s map, there were two maps prepared in the 1780s: that by John Haynes in the early 1780s and the much-reproduced map by John Corris in 1787. These show no significant change in the heritage landscape since 1768.

¹³ Parliamentary approval was given in 1914, which most accounts give as the date of the purchase, which, in fact, was in the following year (details in the golf course title deed – SGL461724). The purchase included Banky Field on the hill slope south-east of Home Park Road and the whole of the present-day golf course. Banky Field was sold for housing development in the 1925 (according to the Wimbledon North Conservation Area assessment) to fund the facilities of the public park, leaving Home Park Road as the boundary in the south of the heritage land. There was no northern boundary between the present-day public park and the golf course in ordnance survey maps from the early 1890s. A boundary is shown first on maps revised around 1911, but it was further west than today, sinuous in shape and met Wimbledon Park Road only a little north of its junction with Princes Way. In maps from 1933-1938, the LB Merton part of the boundary had been moved to its present position, a little east of previous, but the LB Wandsworth part remained as in 1911. This part was not shown straightened and moved east to its present position until a map revised in 1949. In the south, the boundary between the public park and golf course follows the western edge of an 18th century carriage drive

within Ashen Grove Wood. The northern portion of this drive became the path that runs down from the dam to the children’s play area today. The earliest ordnance survey map to show the present boundary was surveyed in 1911, so predating the purchase of the land by the Wimbledon Corporation. The golf course, controversially, was sold to the All England Lawn Tennis Club in 1993, but there was no significant change in management, nor boundaries, as a result.

¹⁴ Mowing machines were invented in 1830, soon obviating the use of the scythe for large areas of lawn.

¹⁵ A pollard tree was managed for small wood and foliage for animal food. It would be in a hedgerow, at the edge of a wood, or out in a pasture (wood-pasture). As it was exposed to grazing animals, the branches were cut at 3 metres high, protecting the regrowth from the animals. The trunk of a pollard could last centuries through this regeneration. These trunks are naturally hollow, from fungal decay, but not agents of disease. As shown by the great storm of October 1987, such trees are more resistant to wind throw than are tall younger trees (Rackham, O. 1981. *Introduction to pollards*. In Reed, H.J. (Ed) *Veteran and Pollard Tree Management*).

¹⁶ Alder nettle woodland (W6) is scarce in London (*London’s woodland and scrub communities*, London Biodiversity Partnership, Dawson, D. 1999).

¹⁷ There is no firm definition of “ancient”, “veteran”, “notable”, “heritage” or “champion” trees:

www.ancienttreeforum.co.uk/ancient-trees/what-are-ancient-veteran-trees/. All the old trees were English Oaks. Here we identify two champions as those with the greatest estimated age. These may also be considered ancient. I take the girth of an oak at 1.5 m above ground as an indication of its age, as it’s this that can readily be measured. This can be translated into the more commonly employed diameter. I use the method published in the Forestry Commission Advisory Note, *Estimating the age of large and veteran trees in Britain*, by J. White, 1988. For the open grown trees, I employ the estimates for average open growing situations. A few trees which grew in the middle of dense woodland were estimated with the much slower growth rate appropriate. With some minor rounding, this gives the following estimates:

Girth (mm)	Equivalent diameter	Open grown age	Woodland age
3100	1000	150	300
3500	1100	175	400
3800	1200	200	450
4100	1300	225	525
4400	1400	250	600
4650	1500	275	650
4900	1570	300	750
5800	1850	400	1000
6600	2100	500	Over 1000

Trees with an estimated age over 275 years were assumed to predate Brown’s landscaping and are called ancient in this report. Those with estimates between 225 and 275 years could well date back to Brown’s landscaping of 253 years ago and are called veterans here. Three

¹⁸ www.ancienttreeforum.co.uk/ancient-trees/ancient-tree-ecology-wildlife/invertebrates/

¹⁹ A standard walk has been undertaken in the heritage landscape by the author once a month for 31 years and this study continues. An interim report on the findings in on the Friends of Wimbledon Park website: www.friendsofwimbledonpark.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Wimbledon-Park-birds.pdf

²⁰ The values were described in the London Ecology Handbook *Nature Conservation in Merton*. Since that was published in 1998 its importance for veteran trees, woodland, birds and bats has been confirmed by subsequent studies. A recent survey of bats (*Bat emergence and activity surveys Heritage Wimbledon Park*. Alison Fure. 2017) confirmed the presence of seven species using the heritage landscape, with evidence that at least two or three species were roosting in trees on the golf course and nearby parts of the public park.

²¹ Metropolitan Open Land affords protection against built development, except for that integral to the open space use, so this designation does not prevent tree work. A Site of Importance for nature conservation has to be taken into account in the determination of development proposals, where a net gain is to be sought but, again, tree work does not constitute development. However, tree work in Conservation Areas has to be referred to the local planning authority (here LB Merton or LB Wandsworth). This Section 211 referral allows the authority to consider making Tree Preservation Orders, enabling consideration of the amenity, historic and species conservation values of individual trees, groups of trees or stands of woodland. In December 2011 four mature trees were felled on the golf course without referral to the planning authority. Although best practice in such a sensitive site is for wider publicity and to consult interested parties on S211 referrals and on

protected trees, subsequent tree clearance has been undertaken without adequate consultation, nor full consideration of the values. Best practice is described in government advice flow charts for trees in conservation areas and Tree Preservation Orders:

www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/578699/tpo5.pdf

²² The golf club report is the *Arboricultural management plan, Wimbledon Park Golf Club*, prepared by ADAS in 2013 and updated somewhat in documents submitted to LB Merton as Section 211 notices for tree works. Unfortunately, this report details mainly those trees that were considered a priority for safety work or monitoring, but with some detail of the veteran trees requiring special management to conserve their values. The AELTC report is the *Wimbledon Park Golf Club Tree Survey*, prepared by G. King of Tree King Consulting in 2017. It is more comprehensive and is the main source employed in this note. Both reports have been supplemented by previously unpublished surveys by the author for the forthcoming new London flora.

²³ The flora is a ten year project of the London Natural History Society.

²⁴ Letter from Historic England to the General Manager of the Golf Club dated 6 June 2016 and outlining the risk. The aim of the At Risk Register is to keep attention focused on the heritage site, to act as a working tool to help define the scale of the problem and to prioritise action by Historic England, local authorities, preservation trusts, funding bodies and others who can play a part in securing the future of these irreplaceable landscapes.

²⁵ The depots, the temporary and permanent tennis facilities of The Wimbledon Club and the Watersports Centre.

²⁶ But the woodland screened from view ugly depots, bonfires and dumped materials, now exposed to view.

²⁷ Dawson, D. 2018. *Ashen Grove Wood*. Report for the Friends of Wimbledon Park.