

Ashen Grove Wood

Dave Dawson, March 2018

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This report describes this wood which spans the boundary between the Wimbledon Park Golf Course and the children's play area of the public park. It is based mainly upon survey information obtained in Spring 2015 and 2017 during fieldwork towards the London Natural History Society project for a new London Flora. The wood is the remnant of a 40 acre (16 ha) wood owned by the Lord of the Manor of Wimbledon, dating back at least to the early 17th century² and so it is an ancient wood³. Its extent is around 0.7 ha⁴, only 4% of its first recorded extent.

History

The first good map of the area (Figure 1) was prepared by Thomas Richardson for the first Earl Spencer in 1768⁵, just two years after the park was landscaped by Lancelot Brown. At that time, it had been reduced to 10 acres (4 ha), about a quarter of its 17th century extent. The largest part of the wood grew on the London Clay of Vineyard Hill⁶. It



narrowed northwards down the clay slope to the much flatter Head Deposits which underlie the broad valley of Wimbledon Park Lake. There, the northern projection of the wood grew on the slopes of the dam built by Brown to create the lake. The wood surrounded the eastern arm of the lake, where there was a small wooded promontory and a spillway, or waterfall, leading to a brook. The brook ran north from there along the eastern edge of the wood before turning east to flow 1.2 km to the River Wandle in Earlsfield. The northern tip of the wood was near the present-day bowls pavilion. A carriage drive from the Manor entered the wood from the south west and another from the south. A drive ran north within the wood down across the spillway and swept up onto the dam to afford views across the Lake. This drive ran approximately on the line of the present-day boundary between the public park and golf course. Further west, the parkland trees of the adjoining Vineyard Hill Wood surrounded a drive on the flank of Vineyard Hill and extended down the slopes to the lake.

Figure 1. The wood in 1768

Maps by John Corris⁷ and John Haynes⁸ from the 1780s show essentially the same details. Corris was the first to name the wood, as well as the adjacent Vineyard Hill Wood and Vineyard Hill Field to the east of the wood. After 60 years enjoying their park, the Spencers became absentee landlords in 1827 and the park and wood were rented out as farmland. In 1846 the farmland was sold to J.A. Beaumont, a property developer.

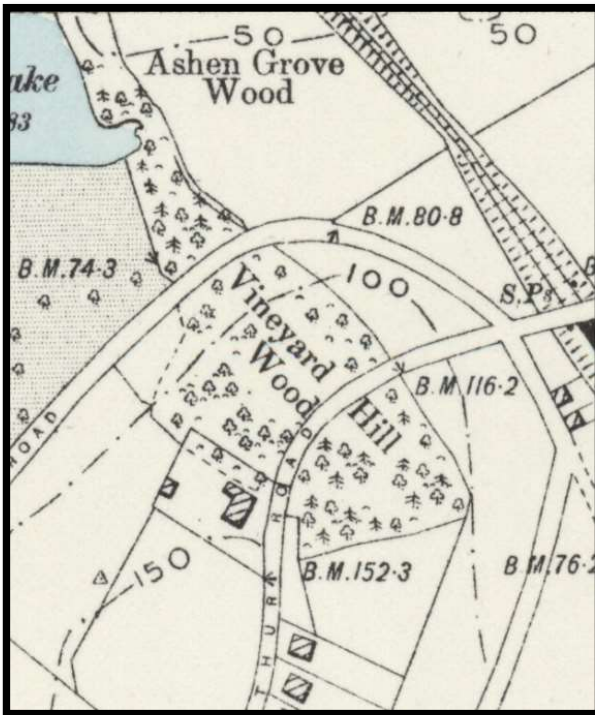


Figure 2. The wood in 1894

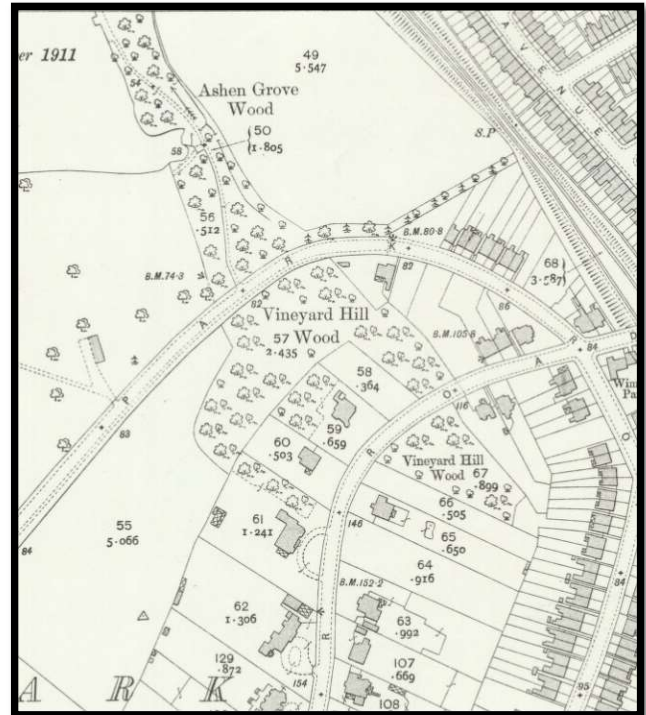


Figure 3. The wood in 1913

The wood remained the same throughout this time, as shown on Tithe maps from the 1850s and the first Ordnance Survey maps from the 1860s⁹. Presumably it was used for the harvest of small wood, as is typical¹⁰. The main carriage drive from the Manor house to the wood was upgraded as a farm road and continued east, on the line of the southern boundary of today's public park. Confusingly, the main block of the wood south of the farm road was renamed Vineyard Hill Wood, with Ashen Grove Wood restricted to the northern part.

Beaumont built Arthur and Home Park Roads through the wood in the 1870s, destroying part of the wood, especially around Home Park Road, where there was cut and fill. Development didn't follow, and Ordnance Survey maps of the 1890s (Figure 2) show little further incursion into the wood. There was a second sluice at the northern tip of the wood, leading to a tank and a brook which flowed south on the eastern side of the wood to join the earlier brook. This was still to be seen in 1949 (Figure 4).

Wimbledon Park Golf Course was developed in 1898, so retaining open land there. By 1905, however, housing development had begun to erode the part of the wood that surrounded Arthur Road¹¹, as is illustrated in the Ordnance Survey map of 1913 (Figure 3). North of Home Park Road, the wood was saved from development by being purchased by the Municipal Borough of Wimbledon in 1915. A small area south of Home Park Road survived until after 1949, renamed as Cherry Tree Wood.

As the public park was developed in the 1920s, further changes came (Figure 4). Although the northern part of the wood was still named on the maps as Ashen Grove

Wood, the trees were thinner on the ground. Nowadays, this part, which lies on the slope of the dam north of the path leading up to the lake from the children's play area, has trees planted in the 1920s, or since. Some woodland plants survive, but the character is no longer woodland. The waterfall had been constructed there by 1949¹². The children's play area was developed in the 1950s, when most of the shrubs and ground flora were cleared from that half of the wood, leaving the woodland trees standing bare.



Figure 4. The wood in 1949

With the coming of golf, it appears that none of the wood was in productive use. During the Second World War, the golf clubhouse, which was beside the southern arm of the lake, was destroyed by bombing. After the war the replacement was built against the western boundary of the wood, eroding some of it (Figure 4). Subsequent construction of buildings north of the clubhouse has further eroded this part of the wood. There has also been a considerable amount of tipping into the wood from the path that runs beside the eastern side of the club house. Here, large quantities of redundant equipment, rubble and vegetation are heaped high over the ground, causing serious damage to the woodland flora.

The wood in 1949

The woodland today

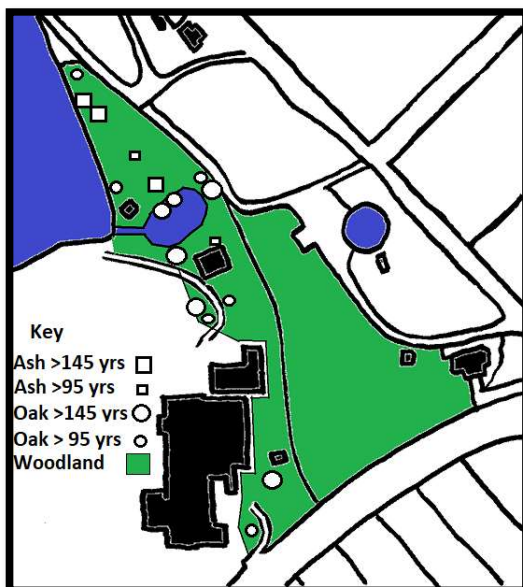


Figure 5. Ashen Grove Wood Today.

Figure 5 illustrates the woodland today. Details of the part in the public park await further work.

Like Horse Close Wood, which lies nearby on the northern boundary of the public park, Ashen Grove Wood is Oak, Ash, Elm woodland. It has smaller numbers of Horse Chestnut, Norway Maple and Sycamore. Beneath the woodland canopy there are many young trees of Ash, shrubs of Holly, Yew and Elder and suckers of Elm. The Elm dates back to the death of a few Elm trees in the 1960s and 70s, the suckers originating from the root plates that survived the disease. There are a few shrubs of Buddleia and Cherry Laurel. In the south of the wood is a small area dominated by Russian Vine. The ground is

dominated by Ivy and Bramble, with extensive areas of native Bluebells, Lords & Ladies and Cow Parsley and lesser amounts of Wood Dock, Pendulous Sedge, Nettle, Yellow Iris, Wood Millet, Cock's-foot, Dandelion and Green Alkanet. The wood is classified as plant community "W8d"¹³. This is typical of woodlands in the south-east of England on base-rich, fertile soils and with a long history of canopy closure. Oliver Rackham, states that this type rarely has Oak underwood and can be one of the richest in the UK¹⁴.

As with all ancient woods, the value lies primarily in the heritage of woodland soil, with its seed bank and in the plant species that survive. The wood has four ancient woodland indicator species¹⁵ (Pendulous sedge, Holly, native Bluebell and Wood millet) implying that a better search would find more species and that a good range of woodland species probably occur in the seed bank.

Veteran trees are the most obvious link with the woodland past and are also known to provide valuable habitat for other species, such as bats, birds, fungi and invertebrates. Figure 5 marks the 17 older trees of the wood¹⁶. Really ancient trees are uncommon in woodland, being confined to parkland situations¹⁷. Six English Oaks and three Ashes were estimated to be 150 years of age or older. Some of these trees would have been present when Wimbledon Park was still owned by the Earls Spencer. Two of the veteran oaks grow in the north bank of the stilling pond and both lean over it. A further six English Oaks and two Ash were estimated to be between 100 and 145 years of age, so dating back to the times when the area was farmland or early in the establishment of the golf course. The woodland oaks are of particular value, because oaks no longer establish naturally within woodland. The reason for this regeneration gap are speculative¹⁸, but it means that the oaks within the woodland may be irreplaceable. The habitat value of these old trees is illustrated by the breeding there of Stock doves, Great-spotted woodpeckers, Blackcaps and Song thrushes¹⁹. The wood is also provides important shelter for several species of bat that visit the woodland edge because the trees screen the lake from light pollution and from the winds that reduce the availability of insect food²⁰. The early arrival of some of the bat species after sunset suggests that they have roosts in nearby trees. Further valuable habitat is provided by the young trees (largely Ash), shrubs and Elm suckers, both as shelter for the adjacent lake and as cover and a food source for birds and other animals.

Because of these values, the wood is an important element in the Heritage landscape that survives from the 18th century Wimbledon Park. Its amenity value stems from its landscape role, as recognised by Lancelot Brown, but also as an historic feature and a nature conservation asset. It was wholly included in a Site of Borough Importance for nature conservation, grade I, in the consultation on the Ecology Handbook for LB Merton and confirmed as such in the handbook²¹.

Management needs

Detail for the part in the public park awaits further work.

Such a small wood in an area of multiple use is inappropriate for traditional management, such as coppicing. The main need is the retention of the trees with their valuable dead wood habitat, subject to works to remove hazard (preserving as much of the tree as is consistent with safety, even if it is dead). Another priority is to avoid further encroachment into the wood and to remove the large amounts of waste dumped beside the path east of the clubhouse. Clearance of the patch of Russian vine may also allow the regeneration of an English Oak or two and would also allow further woodland plants to establish from the seedbank in the soil.

Engineering reports²² suggest that the wood presents a hazard to the integrity of the dam. In fact, the main hazard stems from the raising of the lake level some 0.36 m above the historic level some time after 1932²³. This has greatly reduced the amount that the lake

can rise in response to rainfall before it overtops, risking erosion of the dam. This high level also compromises the lake's ability to function as a balancing reservoir and leads to poor drainage in the golf course and The Wimbledon Club. The species and nature of the surviving woodland trees, saplings, shrubs and ground cover present no significant risk to the integrity of the dam. The risk of windthrow can be minimised by appropriate tree works short of felling. The dam was wooded throughout most of its history. Clearance of trees would risk exposing other trees to wind throw and risks the death of roots, which could compromise the integrity of the dam as they rot. Overtopping the dam would be nearly impossible were the level of the outflow weir reduced to its historic position.

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² The report of a survey of 1617 documented Ashen Grove Wood as owned by the Lord of the Manor: a "great" forty acre wood to the west of "Dunsford Lane" (Milward 1976:19). In 1633 the Lord (Viscount Wimbledon) leased it to a yeoman from Hertfordshire, John Halfhead, who is said to have cleared most of it and developed a farm (Milward 1976: 19 & Milward 1989: 94).

³ *Ancient Woodland*. UK Parliament Postnote 465, 2014. Ancient Woodland is woodland that existed in 1600. A first mention in 1617 means that it must have originated by 1600, if not much earlier. Most such woodlands are believed to be primary: to have continuity back to the woodland that established after the last ice age.

⁴ Estimates from polygons in Google Earth are equal areas of 0.33 ha in each of the golf course and public park, a total of 0.66 ha,

⁵ This map is held in the LB Lambeth archives.

⁶ Between the 100' (30 m) and 150' (46 m) contours.

⁷ Prepared to assist the second Earl Spencer to keep track of his land holdings, it was dated 1787 and is widely reproduced. A good reproduction is on display in the Museum of Wimbledon.

⁸ On display in the Museum of Wimbledon, incorrectly dated 1770. Other details show that it cannot have been surveyed before the early 1780s.

⁹ The Tithe maps, these (and other) Ordnance Survey maps, can be consulted in the Museum of Wimbledon and many are also on the National Library of Scotland website.

¹⁰ Rackham, O. 2003. *Ancient Woodland, its history, vegetation and uses in England*. New Edition, Castlepoint Press.

¹¹ Bacon Atlas of London 1905.

¹² The waterfall is sometimes said to have been constructed to celebrate the coronation, presumably that of George VI in 1936 as that of Elizabeth II wasn't crowned until 1952.

¹³ In the National Vegetation Classification, "Ash/Field Maple/Dog's-mercury woodland, ivy sub-community". It has two of the three typical canopy species (Oak and Ash), with the typical Hawthorn and Elder underneath. The absence of Field Maple is allowed in the description of the sub-community. The main distinguishing features of the sub-community are the absence of Bracken and the abundance of Ivy as ground cover. The NVC supposes that the relative scarcity of Bluebells and Dog's-mercury in this sub-community reflects a long period (over 20-50 years) of canopy closure. Rodwell, J.S. *et al.* 1991. *British plant communities. Volume 1. Woodlands and scrub*. Cambridge University Press.

¹⁴ Rackham (2003) pp 203- 215.

¹⁵ See *Indicators of ancient woodland. The use of vascular plants in evaluating ancient woods for nature conservation*. F. Rose, British Wildlife 1999: 231.

¹⁶ Sadly an old Ash near the stilling pond was felled recently, although the stump shows that this tree was sound. To estimate the age of other trees, I used 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 and woodland edge trees I employed 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. These ages are very approximate, but serve to identify the most valuable trees both for heritage and habitat value.

¹⁷ Rackham, O. 2003. *Ancient Woodland, its history, vegetation and uses in England*. New Edition, Castlepoint Press.

¹⁸ Rackham, O. 2003. *Ancient Woodland, its history, vegetation and uses in England*. New Edition, Castlepoint Press. See pages 294 to 297 for a discussion of the causes of the Oak regeneration gap. The relative contribution of Oak mildew disease and of shade remains uncertain, but shade certainly plays a role.

¹⁹ Observations by the author on monthly standard walk bird surveys over the last decade.

²⁰ 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. The sensitive Daubenton's bat was found feeding over the lake in only three small areas, one of which was immediately west of the wood.

²¹ *Nature conservation in Merton*. Yarham, I. et al. 1998. London Ecology Unit.

²² Hewlett, H.W.M. 2013. *London Borough of Merton Wimbledon Park Lake. Report on a statutory inspection under section 10(2) of the Reservoirs Act 1975*. Stillwater Associates.

²³ Dawson (2018) *Wimbledon Park Lake*.