Wimbledon Park lake
by Dr Dave Dawson

In 1765 John, first Earl Spencer, commissioned a radical re-design of the recently enlarged manorial estate of Wimbledon by the renowned Lancelot "Capability" Brown. Brown was the leading exponent of the fashionable "English garden"[i]. The central feature of this was a new lake formed by building a dam across the wide valley of a brook that flowed east to the Wandle at Earlsfield[ii]. The lake survives today in essentially the same shape[iii], and surrounded by the remnants of the manorial park: the public park, Wimbledon Club and Wimbledon Park Golf Course.

The lake was the focal point in the foreground of a celebrated view in Georgian times, across the landscaped manorial park towards Wandsworth and central London from the Marlborough Manor House on Vineyard Hill[i]. Today it remains the main feature of a fine landscape, listed by English Heritage[iv]. There are views across it from Home Park Road and the golf course, even if these are marred by the ugly developments of the Wimbledon Club, athletics stadium and water sports centre[v].

The lake was formed over the confluence of two brooks. These originate in springs at the edge of the flat gravel terrace that occupies the top of the hill to the south and west and they enter the west and south arms of the lake[vi].

In Georgian times its catchment was predominantly common land, parkland and farms[vii], and this was before the onset of intensive land management, so the water quality was good. There was a fine fishery.

Now, 250 years later, like most shallow lakes in lowland Britain, it is eutrophic[viii]. The catchment is predominantly suburban and has extensive hard surfaces, such as houses and roads. Runoff from these is rapid and carries pollutants. This was exacerbated in the late 1990s, by the construction of an extra inflow to take runoff from the All England Club and pollution has come from this source[iv]. Other sources of pollution are the intensive management of the golf course, feeding of the carp by the fishermen, the large populations of waterfowl and excess bird feeding by the public.

Some of this can be ameliorated but, whilst the catchment remains suburban, the water will never return fully to its former quality. As a result of this pollution, and the high population of carp, the lake has lost the beds of waterlilies that it once had, and submerged water plants can be a problem in warm summers[viii].

Now, the lake is owned by Merton Council, as is a strip of land bordering both the golf club and the Wimbledon Club. The golf club leases this strip from the council and the rest of the course is also leased, from its present owner, the All England Club. Other uses of long standing are the Wimbledon Park Angling Club and the Wimbledon Park Watersports Centre[ix]. And, of course, the public enjoy the lake and its birds from the path on top of the dam.

Over the last 250 years, the lake has been slowly silting up. Once up to 2.5 metres deep, there are now few places much more than one metre deep[x]. To provide sufficient depth for water sports, the outflow weir has to be kept high, and this causes a high water table and some flooding in the low parts of both the golf course and Wimbledon Club. Although the average rate of siltation is only about a centimetre a year, the problems with water depth can only get worse. The Friends of Wimbledon Park hope to raise the funds to remove silt as part of their proposal to regenerate the lake[xi].

The lake is important for water birds, especially in winter, when many birds come from places further north and east in Europe seeking ice-free water[xii]. In summer, it also attracts at least four species of bat to feed on the rich insect life associated with the water[xiii]. Its value as wildlife habitat has led to its recognition as a Site of Borough Importance for nature conservation[xiv]. The lakeside vegetation, although badly managed in the past, retains value, and a Pyramidal orchid was found there last year. There's an urgent need to manage these margins for multiple use: another ambition of the Friends of Wimbledon Park[xi].

Large populations of geese visit the lake seasonally[xii], attracted by the extent of water alongside the grasslands of the park and golf course. Unfortunately, geese can foul the lake margins and grassland and there is little that can be done to ameliorate this. Other visitors include common terns, kingfishers, grey herons and cormorants, which catch some of the smaller fish. Attempts by the angling club to deter cormorants have been largely unsuccessful and the public enjoy seeing these birds perched to dry out their plumage after a successful fishing trip.

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[i] Milward, R. 1996. *Wimbledon two hundred years ago.* Chapter 4. The Milward Press.

[ii] To the south and west, high ground surrounds the valley of the lake, this being the flat "High Level, or Black Park, Terrace" about 50 metres above sea level. This dates back to the glacial maximum of 450,000 years ago, which forced the Thames to flow through our area for the first time. Nowadays it extends across the eastern part of Wimbledon Common and Putney Heath and also underlies suburbia further east. Originally, it would have occupied a much wider area extending far east of the present-day lake. Erosion in subsequent glacial times exposed the underlying London Clay and formed the valley. These erosional slopes are steep and contrast with the flatness of the terrace. The surviving parts of the manorial park are in the flatter bottom of the valley, which has mainly "Head Deposits": clays and silts eroded by solifluction from the higher slopes in glacial times. (References: H F Barron, J Brayson, D T Aldiss, M A Woods and A M Harrison. 2012. *London's foundations: protecting the geodiversity of the capital*. The Mayor of London, London Plan, Supplementary Planning Guidance. *South London, geological map sheet 270. Solid and Drift Edition 1:50 000 series.* 1981. Geological Survey of Great Britain (England and Wales)).

[iii] There are two main exceptions to this. First, the moving of the outflow structure west, and so straightening the edge of the lake at its eastern extremity and severing off a small part of the lake to create an outflow pond at a lower level and separated from the rest of the lake3. Second, the golf club has used the extremity of the southern arm of the lake, that was mapped originally as marsh, to mound soil and other materials, a very significant loss of wetland habitat. Both modifications seem to have been in the 20th century, as the 1916 Ordnance Survey map shows the original arrangements.

[iv] www.english-heritage.org.uk/caring/listing/registered-parks-and-gardens

[v] *Wimbledon Park Restoration Proposals*. 1998. Glasspoole Thompson Landscape Architects.

[vi] The position of the brooks is determined from the modern contours and old maps, especially the Corris map[vii] and a series of Ordnance Survey maps. They are best described with reference to present-day landmarks. To the west, a brook originates in a spring just east of the Wimbledon Common Windmill and leaves the common just north of Clockhouse to descend along the line of Queensmere Road and the lower part of Bathgate Road to enter the western arm of the lake. It has one tributary joining it from the southwest along the line of Bathgate Road. Near the head of this tributary, the 1786 map shows "round pond", of which there is no trace today. To the south-west, the other main brook originates at the southern end of Parkside Avenue and flows down Deepdale to cross Burghley Road and the All England grounds before crossing Church Road to enter the golf course. It feeds into the southern arm of the lake. This brook was impounded near its source, to form a large fishpond and several other ponds, all within the grounds of Wimbledon House (seen on the 1850 Tithe map, and Ordnance Survey map of 1890s for example), but all that survives today is the northern arm of the fishpond in the Buddhapadipa Monastery grounds, which is fed by a spring off the line of the main brook to the north. A minor tributary to this brook arises just south of Somerset Road and is confluent with it near where they both cross Somerset Road into the All England grounds. Another brook originates between Marryat Road and Lancaster Gardens and also crosses Burghley Road before its confluence, probably under the All England grounds. It too had several fish ponds along its length in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and one survives today behind 7 Lancaster Gardens. There are two other brooks further east, feeding the lake. One is shown on the 1787 Corris map[vii] flowing from near the old Rectory, through the present-day golf course parallel to Church Road, where there was the, now lost, "dirty pond". The other originates near Arthur Road and is marked by a dip in Arthur Road and also Home Park Road, whence it crosses into the golf course.

[vii] J Corris, Plan of Wimbledon and surrounding Parishes, 1787

[viii] Dave Dawson found extensive beds of submerged Rigid hornwort, *Ceratophyllum demersum,* Horned pondweed, *Zannichellia palustris* and Small pondweed, *Potamogeton berchtoldii* in the summer of 2013. These are indicative of eutrophic water.

[ix] www.merton.gov.uk/leisure/sport/facilities/wimbledonparkwatersports.htm

[x] The water of the lake is about 17.5 metres above sea level (from a contoured plan of Wimbledon Park Golf Club dated June 2011), and the 15 metre contour is mapped by Ordnance Survey as just east of the dam, giving a maximum depth of 2.5 metres, originally. The greatest depth of silt is over two metres, just west of the centre of the dam between the waterfall outlet and the boat storage[iv].

[xi] www.friendsofwimbledonpark.org.uk/fowp-project-plan

[xii] www.friendsofwimbledonpark.org.uk/2013/04/bird-survey

[xiii] Fure, A. 2005. *Wimbledon Park, SW19, bat surveys October 2005*. Report to Merton Council.

[xiv] Yarham, I. Dawson, D., Boyle, M. & Holliday, R. 1998. *Nature conservation in Merton*. Ecology Handbook 29, London Ecology Unit.