

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT
THEYDON BOIS**

WANSFELL COLLEGE

TQ447 997

Remains of a Victorian villa garden with pathways, mature specimen trees, pond with island, oriental style pavilion (Grade II), restored lean-to green house and donkey shed.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Wansfell house was built in the 1870's as part of a development of several similar villas all recorded as 'Manor Villas'. Part of Epping Forest was cleared to facilitate this villae development, but further construction was halted when the Epping Forest Act of 1878 was passed. Although preventing further building, the Act had the consequence of enabling several owners of Manor Villas to purchase additional land. In the late 19th century four routeways ran between houses on the development directly to the Forest, one of which still runs between Wansfell and the property to the south.

The second edition 25 ' OS map (1895) indicates the principle building with a conservatory, an in/out drive, two small ponds joined by a stream to the west of the building and a greenhouse nearby.

Wansfell has had several owners. Mr Skinner, the third owner, who bought the property in 1883 named the house Wansfell. He began a series of extensions to the house and built stables and a coach house in the grounds. In 1899 he purchase additional land beyond the coach house and a plot of land either side of the causeway to extend his garden. The enlarged plot extended behind neighbouring properties and included a pond, now referred to as the top pond, with several trees close to it. There was a small building near the Epping Forest boundary, possibly where the pavilion was eventually built.

Mr Skinner appointed Mr Hyde head gardener, and between them they designed and laid out the gardens at Wansfell. Mr Hyde lived above the coach house (now referred to as the cottage). At least five outdoor staff and gardeners worked under him, one of whom tended the kitchen garden and lived, with his wife, in an agricultural shed in the grounds for some twenty years! Mr Hyde laid out the present ornamental style garden, helped construct the pavilion and was responsible for planting a large variety of shrubs and trees many of which are still enjoyed in the present garden.

On the New Series 25' map the garden shows some of the developments outlined above. The top pond has been enlarged to include an island. Photographs in the Wansfell archives (1900s) clearly show the original design with vegetation, stepping-stones and a beehive. Trees were planted on the boundary fence behind the immediate neighbour's property to the north

and along part of one of the original causeways near the top pond. The timber pavilion, also shown on the map, was inspired by the owner's trip to Japan at about this time.

In 1919 Fredrick John Ward purchased Wansfell and extended the house. During his ownership the MP for Epping, Winston Churchill, used the grounds for garden parties to raise funds and the pavilion to hold public meetings.

Mr Askew purchased Wansfell in 1937 and leased it to Fisons during the Second World War. In 1945 the house, five acres of gardens and outbuildings were the subject of a compulsory purchase order by Essex County Council. Wansfell became an Adult Education Centre, used for residential courses, in September 1949. The gardens became difficult to manage under the new usage. The first principal of Wansfell College Dr Down, recalls that *'Mr Hyde kept the garden near the house tidy but the rest got overgrown. The lawns were cut for hay once a year and it took five years to get back to the lawns.....and there was such a crop of thistles in the old vegetable garden that was a paradise for goldfinches'*. He added that near the pond were cowsheds and presumed the area was grazed before Mr Hyde laid out the ornamental gardens. He also states that the paddock was laid out as ornamental gardens by 1920 and there used to be an arch in front of the steps leading down from the pavilion which decayed and was removed around 1951 (Wansfell College Archives).

Over the years Essex County Council bought several properties next to Wansfell, but these were sold off again with part of their gardens, to fund further development at the College. Wansfell closed in 2004 and the building and its grounds were scheduled to be sold.

SITE DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES and SETTING

Wansfell lies in the Metropolitan Green Belt, on the outskirts of the ancient parish of Theydon Bois and south of Epping. In common with neighbouring houses, Wansfell is set back in a minor road from Piercing Hill, the main thoroughfare between Theydon Bois and Epping.

The site occupies 2.072 ha. The garden rises away from the principal building thus giving the top most part of the garden and the pavilion extensive views of the countryside to the east. The boundary with Epping Forest lies along the top end of the garden.

The routeway between the houses to the forest, now Rothwell Road, on the south side of Wansfell is now a drive leading to the college car park area and the one time site of the kitchen garden

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

The curved double entrance drive remains in the same position as on the 25' maps, with some of the trees that were probably planted during the same period. Other planting surrounding the seating area, situated close to the front boundary, is more recent

PRINCIPAL BUILDING

Wansfell is a detached Victorian 'villa' house, which has been extended over the years by previous owners, and in more recent times to accommodate the needs of the growing number of students and to provide disabled access.

PLEASURE GROUND

The grounds are predominantly lawns with a mix of established rhododendrons and mature and younger trees (pine, yew, thuya, horse chestnut, oak, birch, sycamore, dawn redwood etc). Some of the trees are the subject of preservation orders.

The lower lawn area, immediately behind the house, is still evident but has been encroached on by extensions to accommodate students and wheelchair access. The retaining dry stone wall which borders the pathway in this area has been repaired in part, using rubble and other such material. On the other side of this pathway is a mixed planting of trees and bushes, which separates the path from the driveway leading to the car park.

The donkey shed, indicated on the New Series OS Map (1936), close to the modern extension, has recently been repaired. Its occupant used to pull one of the early lawn mowers, and the college archives retain a photograph of the mower in use.

The small stream that crosses nearby is fed from the upper pond. It is still a feature of the garden but in need of repair due to damage caused by a fallen tree. Two bridges cross over the stream, one of modern materials and one of a simple rustic design. Close by the latter bridge the pathway indicated on the OS 25' map (New Series) can be traced. This has not been maintained and is partially covered in grass. Priority has been given to another path, which gives wheelchair access to the upper part of the garden and the pavilion. This path, funded by the Friends of Wansfell College, has many newly planted trees beside it.

The lean-to greenhouse, recently repaired using some of the original materials, originally belonged to the neighbouring house. The Black Hamburg grape vine, said to have been taken from a cutting in Valentine Park, Ilford, has its roots outside the greenhouse (as is usual) and is protected on the outside of the green house by a small wall. The original vine is also said to have provide cuttings for the famous vine grown at Hampton Court. The stone slabs near this corner allow water flowing from the gardens above during heavy rainfall, to pass underneath. The greenhouse that was original to Wansfell has been removed.

The original pathway and the new path lead either side of a large pond. Although the pond is in need of maintenance, and dries out in the summer, it retains most of its original shape and some of its planting. The beehive is a replacement.

The pavilion, in Chinese style, was partly damaged in the storms of 1987, was repaired soon after using much of the original material. It is a curved semi-circular timber construction, with a second storey wooden 'gazebo' reached by stairs from the central area. Views from the pavilion are extensive (the second storey was not accessed during the visit and must be even

more far-reaching). It's relationship to the main building and the garden is shown in a 1970s aerial photograph. In recent years it has been used for plays and outdoor events. The views from this building are only slightly obscured by the trees, which hide the tennis court below. Rhododendrons flourish in this area as well as acers, bamboo and two *Juniperus Chinensis* to compliment the oriental theme. Invasive Japanese Knot Weed is evident throughout the grounds.

Steps lead down from the pavilion to the croquet lawn, and a further set of steps lead down to the tennis court which has been added to in recent years.

The pathway that lead away from the pavilion is bordered to the west by a bed of mainly ferns. The pathway then turns towards the cottage and has Victorian terracotta edging. Two of the pear trees shown in an archive photograph (1900) remain but others have been planted more recently. The border on the other side of the path is still evident but shows no sign of summer planting. The hedge beside this is border is mainly holly.

KITCHEN GARDEN

Part of the kitchen garden is now the college car park, although three rows of the apple trees from the old orchard still remain, as do descendants of the weeds that Dr Down referred to. The remainder is grassed over!

REFERENCES

Victoria County History Vol. 1V pub 1956

Wansfell, a short historical survey. A booklet based on W.Drews' doctoral thesis 'The English Short-term Residential Colleges 1945-1995 ' and on Brenda Oval's archival research on Wansfell College published in 1997

Tree Preservation Order EPO 5/04

Maps:

1895 OS map 25' 2nd Edition

1936 OS map 25' New Series

Archives:

Wansfell College archives containing letters form Dr Down, early college prospectus show some photographs of the garden; aerial photographs taken in 1970's and other photographs of the garden take in the early 1900's

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