

BRENTWOOD BOROUGH COUNCIL
SOUTH WEALD

WEALD PARK

GRADE II

Grid Ref: TQ 569 941

Traces of a medieval deer park with substantial surviving evidence of early eighteenth century landscaping (including a belvedere mound and a rare, but well preserved, example of turf amphitheatre), with major alterations later in the eighteenth century by an unknown landscape designer (sometimes incorrectly attributed to Lancelot Brown).

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The manor of South Weald was held by Waltham Abbey from the Conquest to the abbey's dissolution in 1540. In 1541 it was granted by the crown to Sir Brian Tuke, courtier and formerly secretary to Cardinal Wolsey. The following year he acquired Layer Marney Tower and it is likely that this was his principal residence as he died there in 1545, in considerable financial difficulties. South Weald was devised to his second son George who, in 1548, sold it to that great acquirer of Essex estates, Lord Richard Rich. In the same year Rich sold it on to Sir Anthony Browne (later chief justice of the Common Pleas and founder of Brentwood School). It is probable that he built (or rebuilt) Weald Hall and laid out formal gardens near the house. It was a substantial mansion, rated at 34 hearths in the 1670 hearth tax returns. In spite of later legal disputes over ownership within the family, several generations of the Browne family held the manor until it was sold in 1668 to Sir William Scroggs (d.1683) lord chief justice. His son, within two years of inheriting it, sold it to Erasmus Smith (d.1691), a Turkey merchant, in 1685.

The manor remained in the Smith family, passing through the ownership of his sons, Erasmus (d.1707), Samuel (d.1732) and Hugh (d.1745) (Powell, 1986). Samuel Smith is the patron named on the so-called Bourginion plan which (inexplicably) is dated six years after his death. This shows the design which must have been commissioned by a member of the Smith family, though it is believed that Bourginion was a surveyor rather than a landscape designer. It shows formal walled gardens round the mansion, the shaped, segmented and elaborately planted hillside immediately to its east, and a long rectangular canal at the bottom of the valley to the north. There were two small garden houses, one of which probably survives, much altered and enlarged and now misnamed Queen Mary chapel (it is extremely unlikely that it ever had a religious function). Later improvements by the Smith family include the construction of the Belvedere tower (c.1740-50) and the addition of a second storey c.1750. The tower was raised on an artificial mound within which is buried an elaborate vaulted brick structure to provide a solid foundation for the tower on the freshly dumped soil. A semi-circular flank wall within the mound faced down the main avenue to the water beyond, with a flight of steps on each side to provide access to the tower.

The turf amphitheatre on the west side of the hill slope near to the mansion is shown on the 1738 plan and presumably also dates from the Smith improvements. This consists of a series of interlocking

ramps and terraces cut into the hill slope, and was a feature made popular by Charles Bridgeman who constructed one at Claremont, Surrey in 1716 (Symes, 1993; Taylor, 2006).

Hugh Smith's daughters sold the estate to Thomas Tower in 1752 and, over the next one hundred years, he and his succeeding family made significant alterations to the mansion. By 1777 the formal gardens had been removed and the lake split into two and given a naturalistic shape. An avenue ran northwest from the lower lake. The formal segmented design of the slope above the ha-ha was obscured by planting and by the early nineteenth century appears to have been covered in mature trees. There were twentieth century improvements to the hillside, with a new (or rebuilt) flight of brick steps and flank walls immediately to the north of the mansion, and planting of azalea and pseudocypressus along the two avenues. The park had been progressively expanded during the nineteenth century by the acquisition of adjoining land, including (by the mid-century) Front Park to the south of Weald Road. Shepherds Lane and Carrs Lane, to the north of the old park, were closed as public rights of way. The estate remained in the Tower family until its sale in 1946 by Capt. Christopher Tower. During the Second World War, the park and mansion had been requisitioned by the army and used for military exercises, including tank training which damaged, amongst other things, the earthworks of the Iron Age encampment. Slit trenches were dug and large amounts of unwanted ammunition were dumped in the lake. In 1944 troops and vehicles were assembled here prior to the invasion of France, and the park's deer escaped through breaches in the fences. The mansion was left in a seriously damaged condition.

In 1946, the Metropolitan Railway Estates Company purchased the estate. After demolition of the mansion and the Belvedere tower in 1950 and 1954 respectively, the park (excluding Front Park, to the south of Weald Road) was acquired by Essex County Council, assisted by contributions from the London County Council and Brentwood urban district council for use as a public open space. It has fulfilled this purpose ever since under the guardianship of Essex County Council. Between 1954 and 1968 nearly 50 acres on the north side of the park was replanted with a mixture of species to replace the conifer plantations felled during the Second World War.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING

The present Weald Park, broadly occupying the site of the late eighteenth century park, lies between Lincoln's Lane on the west, Weald Road to the southwest and south, and Sandpit Lane to the east. The northern boundary is irregular, running between $\frac{1}{2}$ and 1 km south of Coxtie Green Road. Front Park, added by the mid nineteenth century, lay to the west, between Weald Road and Weald Brook. Its exact boundaries are difficult to define and, though the area still has the appearance of open parkland with scattered mature trees, it has been returned to agricultural use. As it contains no other significant features, it is not included in this description, though it is included in the Historic England Register map. The mansion was sited at the southern edge of the old park, the land behind it rising quite steeply to South Weald church. To the north, the land falls more gently to a long valley containing two lakes, and then rises in a similar profile to the north of the water. Much of the soil is poorly drained clay and low lying areas quickly become waterlogged during the winter months.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

There are now numerous approaches but, before its conversion to a country park, there was only a short curved drive from Weald Road to the mansion. There has never been a lodge at this point. The Historic England Register description includes the early C19 circular thatched lodge on the other side of the road, but this is on the drive to Rochetts and was not owned by the Tower family. Near the north-west corner of the park in Lincolns Lane there is a house called West Lodge, set well back from the road; in spite of its name, it does not resemble a traditional lodge, is of twentieth century date, and is not connected with a park drive – indeed it would now be difficult to make a continuous drive from here to the site of the mansion, and there is no trace on the ground that one ever existed. Its name appears to be opportunistic.

PRINCIPAL BUILDINGS

Weald Hall was demolished in 1950 after a long period of neglect and military vandalism. The R.C.H.M. description of 1921 suggests that the earliest part of the house dated from c.1540-50, though some C15 features were noted inside the building. The sixteenth century construction was in brick, indicative of a high status house. A sixteenth century wall painting depicted a defaced shield, said to be the arms of Browne impaling Capell. Additions were made c.1560-70 and there were considerable alterations to the fabric during the C18 (including work by Robert Adam in 1778).

The Belvedere tower of c.1740 (and heightened c.1750) was raised on an artificial mound which contained a complex brick structure. There is a semi-circular cut into the mound, facing northwest, and retained by a curved red brick flank wall (18" brickwork in Flemish bond) with a wide shallow central arch (in English bond, the opening now closed off by modern blockwork) and with stone steps running up each side to provide access to the base of the tower. Some of the original Portland stone copings have survived, as well as a brick base (centrally placed in the semicircle) which formerly took a plinth carrying a statue of a stag. A second storey with a castellated parapet was added c.1750. The tower was demolished in 1954, but its floor, the flank walls and the mound have survived.

Queen Mary chapel is a much altered and extended building of sixteenth century origin (listed Grade II) in the north-west corner of the walled garden. It remains in private ownership. Though described by RCHM as a lodge, it is much more likely that it was built as a feature in a formal walled garden. Close to it is a substantial two storey brick granary on staddlestones of c.1800 (listed Grade II). Nearby is a nineteenth century barn (listed Grade II) now used as the visitor centre. All other buildings on the site were built as part of the development of the country park by Essex County Council.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS

There is no surviving evidence of the medieval gardens, if any had existed. Of the early eighteenth century layout, the eastern part of the five sided ha-ha wall is visible and was repaired in 2014; the buried part to the west now forms a raised terrace running around the base of the slope. On the hillside above, traces of two raised embanked segments can be found in the undergrowth, with two avenues, one running northwest towards the centre of the main lake, the other east. The northwest avenue is exactly aligned with a slight mound at the top of the slope on the opposite side of the valley, possibly the site of an eyecatcher though no other physical or cartographic evidence has been found.

Examination of the surviving section of the ha-ha wall in 2000 showed at least three phases of construction or repair. The oldest bricks were eighteenth century 'place' bricks. Three added buttresses were built with late nineteenth or early twentieth century bricks, and further repairs were in twentieth wirecut bricks

Between the most westerly segment and the site of the mansion is a turf amphitheatre, a series of ramps and terraces climbing to the top of the slope. It would have been a dominant feature overlooking the northeast courtyard of the house. This example is remarkably well preserved, though now partly hidden by *R. ponticum* scrub and later planting.

Just to the west of the amphitheatre is a well formed serpentine path which climbs the slope through mature trees. This leads to a private door in the churchyard wall. The north-west corner of the graveyard has been extended (in nineteenth century brickwork laid in a hard cement mortar) to form a private burial ground for the family. This was accessed by a flight of steps (now lost) through a separate door. The path continues past the graveyard extension to reach the base of the Belvedere mound.

At the top of the slope is the artificial mound on which the Belvedere tower stood. Its base has recently been exposed. A semi-circular segment is cut into this mound and stabilised with a curved retaining brick wall in Flemish bond, terminating in low brick piers. A flight of steps climbs each side of the retaining wall. The central section contains a central arched opening (now closed with concrete blockwork) and is built in a darker red brick in English bond. This feature is aligned with the avenue which runs north down to the lake.

There is a broad shallow cutting (of unknown date) which continues the line of the northern avenue from the Belvedere mound down to the lake and attractively frames the view of the water and the landscape beyond. The considerable quantity of earth excavated may have been used to dam the lake or to sculpt the adjoining parkland.

PARK

A short section of a shallow earth bank and ditch (probably remains of the medieval park pale) survives to the west of the Iron Age camp on Sandpit Lane. The old park also contains a number of very large pollard oaks, as well as pollard hornbeams and sweet chestnut, which date from its use as a deer park. A number of these trees have been lost to storms and fire setters in recent years. The larger of the two lakes contains two islands (presumably man-made) and is retained by a substantial earth dam. A brick spillway (spanned by a recently reconstructed brick arch bridge) at its northwest corner takes the overflow to the lower smaller lake which is retained by a much slighter dam close to Weald Road. North of the lower lake is a recently established memorial tree plantation and, beyond that, a tree nursery (now partly abandoned). There are a number of small ponds scattered through the park, probably formed as a result of sand, gravel or clay extraction

The northern part of the park, acquired and added at a later date, contains relics of former roads, tracks and hedge banks reflecting its earlier usage. In the north-west corner (and elsewhere) there are

some fine ancient hornbeam pollards on old hedge lines. Much of this area is now covered in coniferous and broadleaf plantations from the 1954-68 planting programme. A significant feature is the red horse chestnut avenue. All the trees are grafted but are now in poor condition, with some already lost and others very diseased or storm damaged.

KITCHEN GARDEN

This is surrounded by a 12 foot high red brick wall in Flemish bond, with a brick coping and shallow external buttresses, and is heavily overgrown with ivy. It is not accessible to the public and is now the garden of the privately owned Queen Mary chapel. Immediately outside the northeast wall is a very large red mulberry.

A watching brief during contractor's work in 1995 revealed evidence of several late eighteenth or early nineteenth century brick structures, a brick drain thought to be part of a formal garden, and a late nineteenth century brick well (Bennet & Gilman, 1995).

REFERENCES

Books and Articles

- Bettley, J. & Pevsner, N., 2004, *Buildings of England: Essex*, Yale U.P.
- Bennet, A. (ed) 2001 EAH xxxii *Archaeology in Essex 2000*
- Bennet, A. & Gilman, P. (eds) EAH xxvii 1996 *Archaeology in Essex 1995*
- English Heritage, 2001, *Register of Parks & Gardens of special historic interest in England: Essex*
- Essex County Council Field Archaeology Unit, 2003, typescript report and diagram of excavations at The Belvedere, Weald Park.
- Ferguson, C., Thornton, C. & Wareham, A. (eds) 2012 *Essex Hearth Tax Returns*, British Records Society
- Powell, W.R. (ed) 1986, *Victoria County History of Essex*, viii, O.U.P.
- R.C.H.M., 1921 *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments of Essex*, ii, H.M.S.O.
- Symes, M., 1993 *A Glossary of Garden History*, Shire Garden History
- Taylor, P., (ed) 2006 *Oxford Companion to the Garden*, O.U.P.

Maps

1862-78 1st edition 25" ordnance survey map sheet LXVII 2

Researcher Michael Leach; site visited on numerous occasions