



Ponds of Wimbledon Common

Dave Treanor

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ISBN: 978-0-9575748-4-7

Published in July 2017 by Treanor Books of 223 Queens Road,
London SW19 8NX

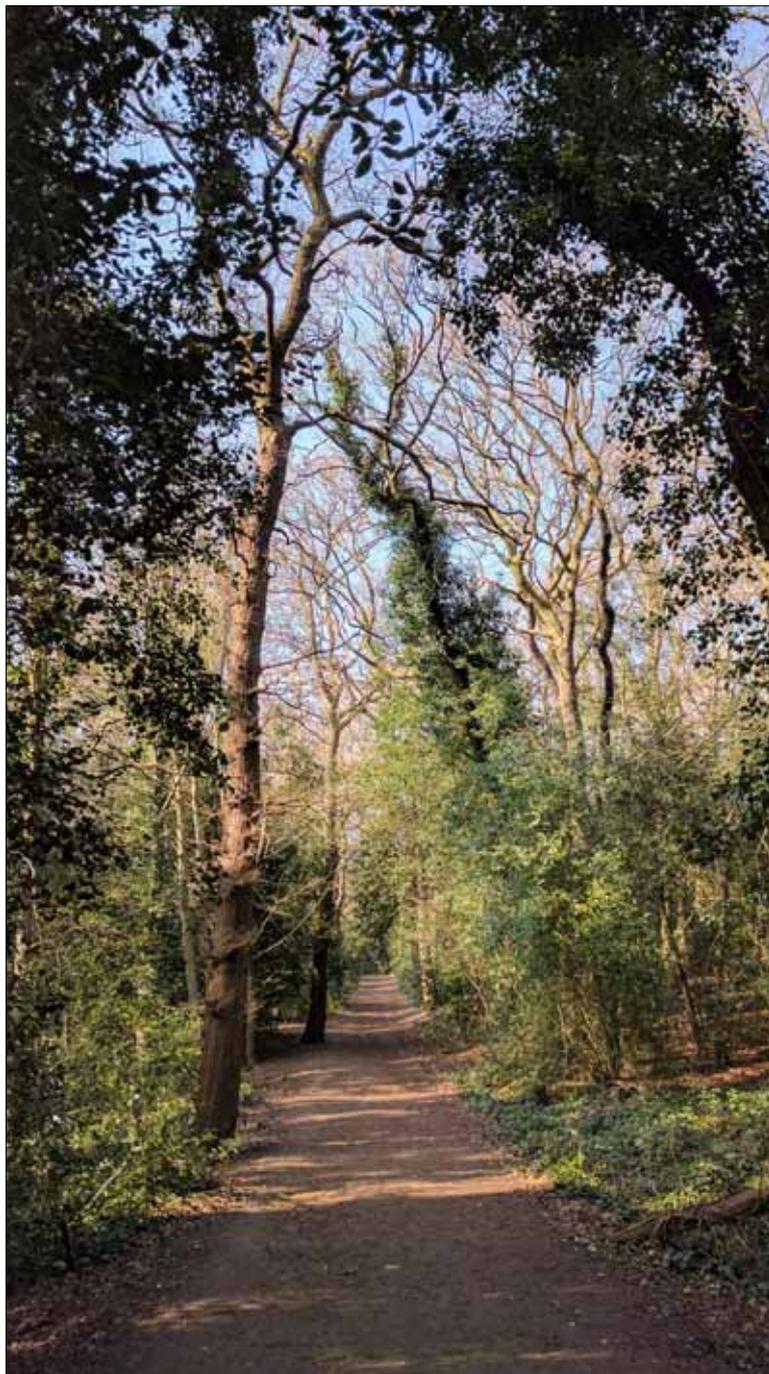
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Photographs by Dave Treanor

Cover photo is of Bluegates Gravel Pit



Wimbledon & Putney Commons Conservators

The Commons were created by the Wimbledon and Putney Commons Act 1871 which transferred the estate from Earl Spencer to a body of eight Conservators, more commonly known today as Trustees. Three Conservators are Government appointed and five elected from the local area every three years. The Commons are a registered Charity (303167). A staff of about 20 is engaged in running the Commons under the direction of the Chief Executive.

Our Vision: *“Wimbledon and Putney Commons will be recognised as an exceptional and welcoming natural place for visitors where wildlife thrives”*

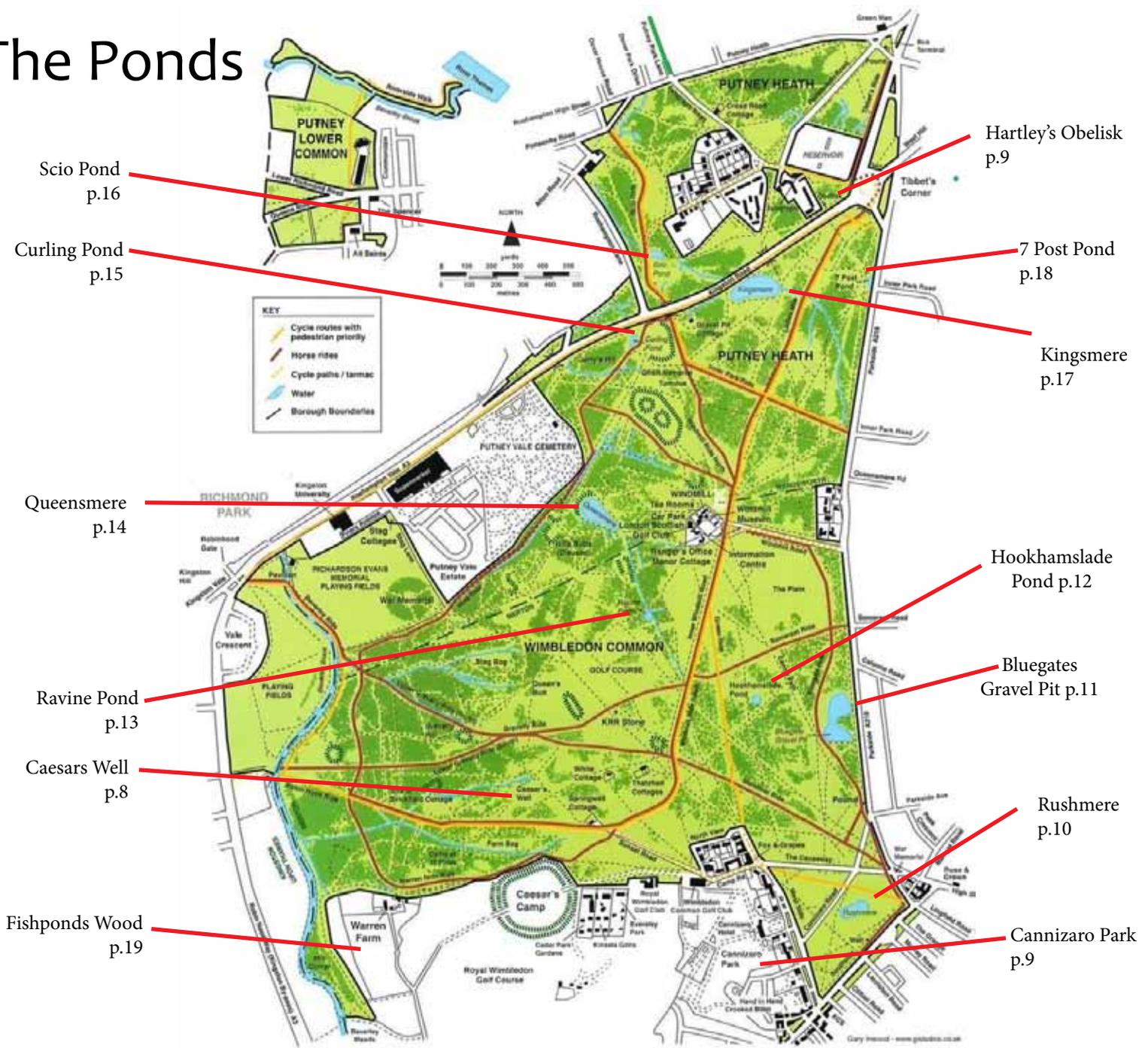
The Commons comprise about 460 hectares (1,140 acres) of semi-rural countryside split between Wimbledon Common, Putney Heath, Putney Lower Common and the Richardson Evans Memorial Playing Field. There is a huge diversity of habitats, from heathlands to woodlands, supporting an impressive and surprising range of flora and fauna. Approximately 360 hectares (900 acres) are a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

The Commons are largely financed by a levy from residents living within $\frac{3}{4}$ mile of the Common or within the old Parish of Putney. Since 1990 the levy has been collected on behalf of the Conservators by the Boroughs of Kingston, Merton and Wandsworth. The Boroughs pass on this levy by way of an addition to the Council Tax on properties in the area.

The Ranger's Office (next to the Windmill) is open 9am to 5pm weekdays, weekends and Bank Holidays (apart from Christmas Day).

The Ranger's Office, Manor Cottage, Windmill Road,
Wimbledon Common, London SW19 5NR
Email: rangersoffice@wpcc.org.uk
Website: www.wpcc.org.uk
Phone: 020 8788 7655

The Ponds



This map is reproduced by kind permission of the Wimbledon & Putney Commons Conservators

Wimbledon Common

Wimbledon Common has a wild quality, that contrasts with the deliberately landscaped Royal Parks (Richmond, Bushy and Hampton Court) which are fenced, and where large red and smaller fallow deer trim the trees to grazing height and consume any young saplings, keeping them as mostly open grassland. Together these green spaces link Wimbledon to the Thames and countryside to the south and west of London, providing plentiful walks, cycle paths, and horse rides.

The commons lie within three boroughs. Wimbledon Common is in Merton and includes the largest area, from the windmill to Wimbledon Village. Putney Heath and the more distant Putney Lower Common are in Wandsworth. Kingston Vale to the west of Beverley Brook is in the borough of Kingston.

The A3 separates the northern half of Putney Heath surrounding Putney Village, and is linked by three paths though subways under the road. Putney Park Lane provides a quiet walkway that leads from Telegraph Road on Putney Heath to Lower Putney Common, and most

of the way down to the Thames. Putney Vale Cemetery and a large area of playing fields border the western edges of the commons.

The soil on Wimbledon Common is gravelly and would have been too poor for anything but rough grazing. The woodland is a mix of native trees such as birch, oak, beech, lime, and hornbeam, with introduced species including sycamores and chestnuts, often with a thick undergrowth of brambles, holly and hawthorn penetrated by many well worn paths. The ground falls away to the west through woodland with clay soils and boggy grasslands where it is drained by the Beverley Brook.

Two clubs share an 18 hole golf course on the common, but start their play at different holes. Regimental officers set up the London Scottish in about 1865 with a club house behind the windmill. Following a series of disputes their civilian members separated in 1882 and formed the Wimbledon Common Golf Club with a club house in Camp Road. A third club, the Royal Wimbledon, was set up in 1907 outside the common's southern boundary.



Brief history of the commons

Ancient Times

Caesar's Camp is on the Royal Wimbledon Golf Course beside the south west corner of the commons. It is an ancient iron age fort, built on a hill with views across to the north downs. It is surrounded by a single earthwork roughly 300 metres in diameter, with a ditch between two mounds. Most of these are still quite visible on the golf course, although one corner is obscured by a heavy growth of gorse.

The ramparts were damaged in 1875 by John Samuel Sawbridge-Erle-Drax MP who planned to build on the monument.¹

Drax (whose name lives on in Draxmount and Drax Avenue) inherited land stretching from Beverley Brook to Westside Common through his wife, and leased some fields to a man named Dixon who built three large houses in Camp Road and then began work to the area of the fort itself. Trees were felled, the ramparts levelled and the ditch filled, until the development was halted by the newly formed Commons Conservators who secured a court order forbidding use of Camp Road for anything other than agricultural purposes.

It was not until 1937 that the great age of the fort was realised, when archeologists were invited to the digging of a trench for a water main to run across it.

It is believed to have been built in about the 3rd century BC. Pottery recovered from the site



has since provided possible evidence for occupation into the Late Iron Age. An urn containing a Roman coin hoard, possibly dating to the 1st century AD, has also been found.

A charter signed by King Edgar the Peaceful in 967 refers to the area of Wimbledon Village as “Wimbedounyng”. In Anglo-Saxon times, Wimbledon was known as “Wynnman’s hill”. Wynnmann was a local landowner, while the “don” part of the area’s modern-day name derives from “dun” – the old English word for hill.²

The Manor of Wimbledon belonged to the Church until 1398 when it was confiscated by Richard II and became crown property. Under Henry VIII it was given to Thomas Cromwell whose birth place is where the Green Man pub now stands. It was confiscated again when he was executed in 1540. It then changed hands a few times, including to Catherine Parr, Queen Mary, Cardinal Pole, and the politician

Christopher Hatton, who sold it to Sir Thomas Cecil, Earl of Essex. The lands of the manor were given to the Cecil family in 1588 and a new manor house, Wimbledon Palace constructed and the gardens laid out in the more formal Elizabethan style.

Charles I purchased the manor back from the Cecil family in 1638 for his Queen, Henrietta Maria. She then sold the manor in 1661 to George Digby, Earl of Bristol, who upgraded the landscape. On his death in 1677, the manor was once again sold on to the Lord High Treasurer, Thomas Osborne, Earl of Danby. The manor was next sold to Sir Theodore Janssen in 1712 and then to Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough, who increased the land belonging to the manor. Her death meant the property passed to her grandson, John Spencer, who later became the first Earl Spencer, ancestor to Princess Diana.

The Commons

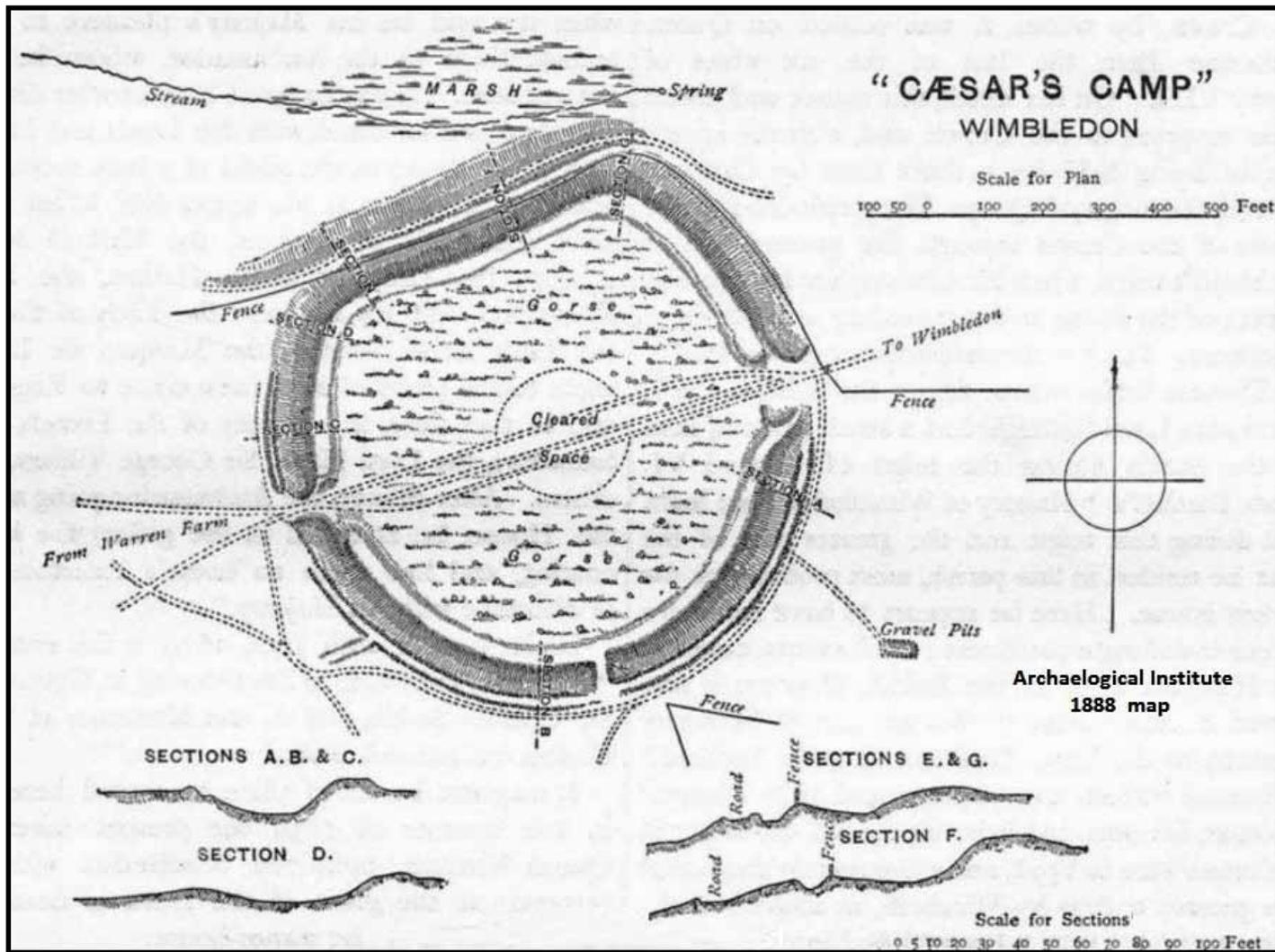
Wimbledon Common was originally used by ‘commoners’ who were granted grazing rights, and could collect firewood, just as on commons elsewhere in the country.

In 1864 Earl Spencer planned to enclose 700 acres to form a park surrounding a large manor house to be built near the windmill. He intended to sell 300 acres as building sites for the town which was expanding as a result of the arrival of the railway to Wimbledon in 1838.

Following a local campaign he was forced to back down, and in 1871 transferred the land to a body of eight Conservators in return for an annuity of £1,200 pa to be paid out of rates levied on local residents.

¹ www.wimbledonguardian.co.uk/news/9646547.Wimbledon_s_worst_vandalism/

² www.robertholmes.co.uk/area-guides/wimbledon/history/





Caesar's Well

There is a spring that rises about 400 yards north of Caesar's Camp, known as Caesar's Well.

The wellhead is about five foot in diameter surrounded by a dozen radiating stone slabs inscribed 'HW PEEK MP 1872' in memory of the local MP who campaigned to stop Earl Spencer from selling off the commons.

The spring dried up in 1911 and the well is now filled with black sludge. The spring that fed it was tapped a little further down the hill running through a pipe into a granite cistern (below), and through a culvert to join the Beverley Brook. This still runs consistently even through times of drought.

To find it, from Springwell Cottage fork right past the green sign and left 15 m later, and walk about 100 m to a ring of Scots Pines (see map).



Windmill

In the 18th century many corn mills powered by water or steam were owned by John Watney whose house 'Rushmere' still stands on Southside.

In 1799 he applied to the Manor Court to enclose a piece of land on Wimbledon Common to erect a windmill. John Watney died before he could build it.

Then in 1816 a Roehampton carpenter, Charles March was granted a 99 year lease on a small plot of land on Wimbledon Common, at an annual rent of two shillings, 'upon this special condition that he shall erect and keep up a public corn mill for the advantage and convenience of the neighbourhood'. He built it in 1817 to a Dutch design.

It ground grain until 1864 when Earl Spencer decided to use the site for his new manor house. Even though he failed, the windmill ceased grinding corn and the stones and milling machinery were removed so that it could not compete with other mills belonging to the Marsh family who had owned it.

The building was converted into living accommodation for six families. The original wooden upper storey was rebuilt using brick, and fireplaces and chimneys were added to give the building the appearance it has today. One room has been retained in the museum to give an idea of the living conditions in 1870.

It underwent major repairs in 1893, and further repairs in the fifties. It has recently been restored with Lottery funding and the sails refitted.³

³ www.wimbledonwindmill.org.uk.



Military history

The KRR Stone (above) was erected to commemorate men of the King's Royal Rifle Corps who passed through the Wimbledon Common transit camp during the First World War.

Charles II reviewed his forces on Putney Heath in 1684. In May 1767 George III reviewed the Guards, and at the same spot in 1799 the Surrey Volunteers

The Tangier Stone was erected on Putney Heath in 1961 to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the first parade of the Tangier Regiment of Foot (now the Queen's Royal Surrey Regiment).

Putney Heath hosted a station in the shutter telegraph chain, which connected the Admiralty in London to its naval ships in Portsmouth. This was later replaced by a semaphore station, which was part of a semaphore line that operated between 1822 and 1847.

In 1920 the Conservators purchased part of Newlands Farm to create the Richardson Memorial Playing Fields, named after the man who helped secure the site. Five acres of this land was dedicated and landscaped as a War

Memorial Grove. At the heart of the site is a granite monument, inscribed with the names of local men who gave their lives for their country in the Great War of 1914-1918. It was dedicated on 25th July 1925.

Many duels were fought on Putney Heath. In May 1652, a duel between George, the third Lord Chandos, and Colonel Henry Compton ended with Compton being killed. On a Sunday afternoon in May 1798 William Pitt, the then Prime Minister fought a bloodless battle with William Tierney, MP.

Hartley's Obelisk

Near Tibbet's Corner, stands an Obelisk commemorating the "Fire House" built in 1776 by Mr David Hartley (see map).

He was the inventor of a system for fire-proofing houses using "fire-plates". These were iron plates fixed over the joists of the upper floors, below the normal floor boarding. Subsequent improvements included iron plates



above and below the floor joists with dry sand packed between.

His "Fire House" was built, using this construction and on 2nd September 1776 he began a series of demonstrations in which the lower floor of the house was set on fire, witnessed by the Lord Mayor and various royalty who presented Mr Hartley with the Freedom of the City. The obelisk was set up near the site of the house to record the experiments and the very large Parliamentary grant of £2,500 he received for his innovation.

Cannizaro Park

The property bordering the Commons on Southside was originally known as Warren House, built by William Browne in 1705. He was sued by the church and excommunicated for defaming the local vicar. Lyde Browne, director of the Bank of England, established a huge collection of classical sculptures there. It is now named after the Duke and Duchess of Cannizaro who occupied it between 1817 and 1841, and were infamous for their 'infidelities

and financial peccadilloes'.

Subsequent residents of Cannizaro House include the Maharajah Duleep Singh a deposed ruler of the Punjab, and Mrs Mary Schuster, whose garden parties and musical soirees included royalty and literary giants such as Lord Tennyson and Oscar Wilde among the guests.

In 1900 the house was burned down and rebuilt. It is now a hotel and restaurant. It became a public Park when Merton Borough Council adopted it in 1949. It has a Grade II listing due to some of the rare plants which can be found around the 35 acres of landscaped gardens, which incorporates a number of follies and colonnades and a few sculptures. One commemorates Haile Selassie who was forced out of Ethiopia in 1936 by the Italian invasion and stayed at Lincoln House on Parkside.⁴

The pond in Cannizaro Park is frequented by moorhens, coots, mallards and mandarin ducks.

⁴ Friends of Cannizaro Park at www.cannizaropark.com





Rushmere

The nearest pond to Wimbledon village is thought to have been formed by gravel extraction in the medieval period. In Tudor times villagers collected rushes here for thatching.

The Wimbledon Guild Village Fair is held on Rushmere Green in June each year. Wimbledon Bookfest is held at the end of September in a marquee erected close to Rushmere pond.⁵

⁵ www.wimbledonbookfest.org

There are fish in this pond, including goldfish brought there by children after winning them at the fair. Rushmere is a good spot for spawning frogs during early March.

There were too many people around for much wildlife, when I took this photo on a sunny day in September 2016, with a few gulls, a pair of Egyptian geese, and a heron.



Bluegate Gravel Pit

One of the prettiest ponds on the common lies alongside Parkside just north of Wimbledon Village. The path to it beside the road is noisy with traffic, but the pond is large, and from the western side is peaceful, and almost always quiet with few visitors, making it a haven for wildlife. It gets a lot smaller but rarely dries out in summer. It is not thought to contain any fish, and the heron often seen here is probably preying on

amphibians. The path around the marshy edges can be treacherous, and seems to be little used. It is rich in vegetation, and quite colourful.

There was a great deal of gravel extraction from the common dating way back into the past, and quite a few of the pits were subsequently filled in with rubble and waste. This is one of the most extensive. At one time it apparently had blue gates.



Hookhamslade Pond

This little pond is less well known, away from any popular paths. It is a little to the left of the straightest path from the village to the windmill, hidden in a spinney of birch.

There were no heron here and it is not thought to contain any fish. It is a very peaceful spot with a bench to sit in contemplation.



Ravine Pond

This is the newest pond on the common, dug out to celebrate the new millennium in the marshy ravine that feeds water into the much grander Queensmere. It is rather well hidden amongst the trees, between two fairways of the golf course just south of the windmill.

I saw three large carp in June 2017, presumably dumped there.

The Ravine was once a bog, but like Stag Bog (just south of the Putney Vale estate) it is now a fragmented remnant of how it would once have appeared. Only Farm Bog just north of Caesar's camp still functions as a bog, impossible to cross without sinking into mud for most of the year.



Queensmere

More a lake than a pond - the deepest on the common. It was excavated for the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria - hence the name. In summer it is resplendent with water lilies, both yellow and white.

The water supports tench and plenty of perch, and even pike. There are coots, moorhens, mallards, mandarin ducks, tufted ducks, cormorants, heron and sometimes a breeding pair of swans. A Womble (*Womblus communus*) was spotted here in 2014, picking up litter.



Curling Pond

Just a puddle in the summer, growing larger after rain. The only remaining one of two ponds that were used for curling competitions until the 1930s.

It is just south of the path linking the two halves of Putney Heath, close to the Roehampton Hills created during construction of the A3.

It has a population of smooth newts, and frogs spawn there in large numbers. It also has an abundance of water snails. Whirligig beetles may be seen circling the shallows on the water surface. Their eyes are in two parts, enabling it to see both above and below the water at the same time.⁶

⁶ www.wpcc.org.uk/nature/ponds



Scio Pond

Scio Pond on the northern section of Putney Heath has lots of lilies, and moorhens nesting in the reeds, together with a variety of other ducks. It has plenty of fish and is the regular haunt of a heron. The nearby Scio House was built in the mid 19th century and named after the birthplace of the Ralli Brothers, its Greek owners from the island of Chios.

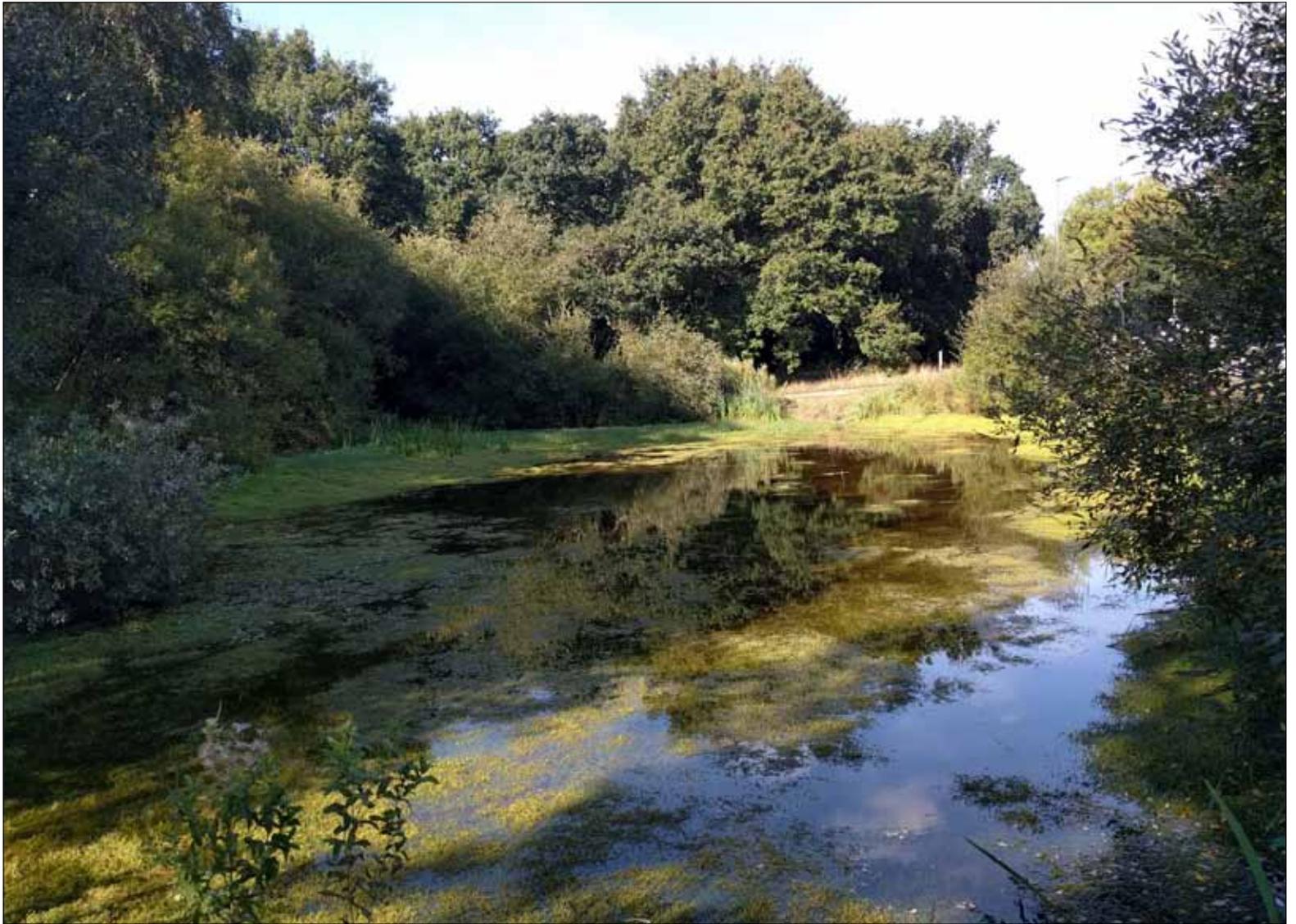
The mansion became Scio House Hospital for Officers. By 1926 it was known as the British Red Cross Hospital, where servicemen injured in the First World War still remained. In the mid-1980s the site was controversially redeveloped as Lynden Gate, a gated community of 70 neo-Georgian homes divided between two streets.



Kingsmere

The biggest lake on the common, but not so well known, lying behind a belt of willow, birch and oak alongside the A3 just before the junction to Roehampton Lane. It is rich in wildlife, and full of fish.

The eastern end was dredged about twenty-five years ago with the spoil being dumped to build up the little island, making a safe nesting area for the many different water birds that thrive here.



7 Post Pond

Just before Parkside reaches Tippet's Corner 7 Post Pond lies right beside the road. It was dug to extract gravel, and then used to dunk the wooden wheels of carts, which drove in and soaked up water to swell the wood so as to tighten their joints and fill the steel rims.

Three carp dumped here in 2016 have been removed, and otherwise it has no fish, although a heron flew off as I arrived. The pond has been invaded by New Zealand Pygmyweed (*Crassula helmsii*) and Parrot's Feather (*Myriophyllum aquaticum*).



Fishponds Wood

A nature reserve has been created by the London Wildlife Trust between the south west corner of Wimbledon Common and Beverley Brook, with boardwalks crossing the bog. The wood was once part of the Abbey of Merton before the monastery was closed in the 16th century. The pond was probably built to store water for a textile mill at nearby Mill Corner.

In more recent times the land became wooded, and was part of Warren Farm until shortly after the Second World War, when the council became the landowner. The woods are mostly oak, birch and hawthorn. The boggy clay acidic grasslands are home to water-loving plants, butterflies, dragonflies and damselflies, frogs and newts, and the occasional cloud of gnats.



Beverley Brook

Its name derives from beaver (bever) meadow (ley). The brook rises in Worcester Park but soon disappears into a culvert that emerges by Worcester Park Station. It can be followed through Motspur Park, but soon after that it becomes entangled with the A3, which it crosses twice, and a stretch of which is named Beverley Way.

It is again accessible a little before the Coombe Lane junction with the A3. It passes across Beverley Meads Recreation Ground and into the Commons Extension just west of the Fishponds Wood Nature Reserve.

It then forms the boundary where Kingston, Merton and Wandsworth all meet on the west side of the common until it crosses under the A3 just past Robin Hood Gate into Richmond Park. It runs through Richmond Park as far as Roehampton Gate. A little footpath to the right of that gate leads to Palewell Fields. From there it meanders through East Sheen, often hard to follow. It crosses a corner of Barnes Green and into Putney Lower Common, emerging into the Thames at Leader's Gardens just upstream from Putney Bridge.⁷

⁷ www.merton.gov.uk/beverly_brook_walk.pdf for a walk along its lower sections.

Birds commonly found at the ponds

The following pages show some of the birds photographed on recent visits, with notes on where they breed taken from a comprehensive list of birds reported to the rangers as observed on the Common during 2014.⁸

⁸ www.wpcc.org.uk/downloads/nature/the-wimbledon-common-bird-report-2014.pdf



Coots breed on Kingsmere, Bluegate, Queensmere & Rushmere



Tufted Ducks breed on Bluegate and are often seen on Queensmere



Moorhens breed on many of the ponds and on Beverley Brook



Female tufted duck on Queensmere



Female and male Mandarin ducks on Queensmere



Cormorant at Queensmere perched by a swan nesting in March 2017



Male Mandarin on Queensmere. Often seen on Kingsmere, and Scio. They originate from China, and breed at Fishponds.



Terrapins at Queensmere



Canada goose with four goslings on Bluegates in May 2017



Heron on Bluegates



Tadpoles at Ravine Pond



Mallard with ducklings on Bluegates in May 2017



Moorhens at Queensmere



A colourful magpie on a bench that overlooks the windmill



Egyptian Geese, from Africa: often seen on Rushmere, and Bluegate



Mute Swans sometimes breed on Queensmere



Heron landing at Bluegates



Fishpond wood

Caring for the wild life

Dogs

For most of the year dogs may swim in the ponds so long as they do not disturb the wildlife. They are not allowed in any of the ponds during the nesting season from 1st April to 31st August.

Dogs need not be on a lead provided they are under control, except at certain times of the year to protect nesting birds:

- Around Queensmere 1st April to 31st August to protect breeding wildfowl
- On The Plain (south of Windmill Road) 1st March to 31st August to protect skylarks and other ground-nesting birds
- Other restrictions are occasionally posted on notices

It is important to clean up after your dog and remove or dispose of the bags in one of the special bins provided.

Nobody is allowed to bring to the Commons or congregate with more than four dogs at any one time.

Fungi

Because of the ecological importance of fungi, and concern at the disturbance and damage caused by foraging for them there is a Code of Conduct limiting the amount that can be collected to 250g per person.

A permit must be obtained from the Ranger's Office if you wish to pick them. Call in at the Ranger's Office or contact them on 020 8788 7655 or by e-mail.



Kingsmere