2.2: THE CANNIZARO ARM

Part 2.2 of the Assessment covers the part of the Conservation Area which projects north-west of Southside Common and Woodhayes Road into Wimbledon Common, and consists of the following Sub Areas:

- Sub Area 1: Cannizaro Park and House
- Sub Areas 2A and 2B: West Side Common and Chester Road (east)
- Sub Area 3: Camp Road (east), West Place, North View and Camp View
- Sub Area 4: Camp Road (west), Eversley Park and Kinsella Gardens
- Sub Area 5: Chester Road (west), Sycamore Road and Beech Close
- Sub Area 6: The Crooked Billet and Strachan Place

The Cannizaro Arm of the Conservation Area lies within the Archaeological Priority Zone (UDP Policy BE.18).

SUB AREA 1: CANNIZARO PARK AND HOUSE

Extent and Justification

Sub Area 1 consists of the whole of Cannizaro Park and the environs of Cannizaro House, the boundary of the Sub Area being mainly identical to that of the Park. Cannizaro Park is now a registered Historic Park and Garden which is owned and maintained by Merton Borough Council.

History

THE OLD PARK

Cannizaro Park was originally part of The Old Park, an estate of over 300 acres which formed part of the estates of the Archbishops of Canterbury and was purchased in the early 1570s by Sir Thomas Cecil, and then by the Grosvenor family in 1748. It was also known as "The Warren", after one of the earliest houses in Wimbledon which lies west of Caesar's Camp beyond the Conservation Area, and which later became Warren Farm.

Old Park included Westside House and the land adjoining Chester house and the cottages around the Crooked Billet, and stretched westward for about a mile as far as Beverley Brook. It covered Caesar's Camp to the north and as far south as the estates of Prospect Place and Mount Ararat, the boundary line following the Copse Hill road. Early maps show woods either side of the present day Copse Hill, including Wimbledon Wood to the north, but almost all of them were destroyed by 20th century housing development [Milward 1989, p.9 & The Ecology Handbook 29, p.63].

The Drax family owned Old Park for a hundred years until about 1927, and Sir Reginald Plunkett-Erle-Erle-Drax leased 140 acres of it to the Royal Wimbledon Golf Club in 1908. Although he also obtained permission to develop the golf course, the John Evelyn Society persuaded the Council to purchase the site in 1938 and lease it back to the Golf Club. He had succeeded in selling off much of the Park during and after the two World Wars for housing
development, including the inter-war estates of Wool Road and Drax Avenue (now Conservation Areas) and the post-war estate around Chester Road. [Milward p.24]

Map of Sub Area 1, Cannizaro Park

CANNIZARO PARK

All good parks departments should contain at least one real garden, and Cannizaro Park is one such place. It is what Edward Hyams would describe as a paradise garden…The house
owing to fire and partial rebuilding is architecturally pleasant but not outstanding; the park however is one of the finest in the London area [Myson & Berry, 1972].

**The grade II statue, Diana with Fawn**

Cannizaro Park was laid out in the late 18th century for Henry Dundas, and originally covered about 60 hectares, mostly made up of fields and meadows, or rough pasture for the grazing of cattle. Features such as a plantation, a pond, the formal gardens and the kitchen garden were created near the house, and it is these which form the present-day grounds [Ecology Handbook 29, p.70].

The detailed design of the present Park and gardens dates predominantly from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. After the 1914-18 War it fell into decay and was lovingly restored and enhanced between 1920 and 1947 by Kenneth and Adela Wilson, the owners of the house and park from 1920 to 1947, who enlarged the north-eastern section in 1932 when they bought The Kier and added most of its walled garden. Because of the Park’s acid topsoil and gravel subsoil, Mr Wilson and his wife were able to plant many rare trees and shrubs which they brought back from their travels in America and the Far East. The collections of rhododendrons and azaleas in the south of England. The part adjoining the Park’s iron gates, which bear the family monogram from the Wilson’s house in Roehampton, were moved to their present position in 1948. In June 1948 Wimbledon Corporation bought it and leased the Park to the Surrey County Council, who used the House as an old people’s home and opened the Park to the public [Myson & Berry 1972].

The view as one emerges from the entrance is of a wide expanse of fine turf sweeping down and away from the garden front of the house to a classic view between hanging woods over a succession of bosky hills to a distant church spire. [Myson & Berry 1972 p.20]

Cannizaro Park contains over 400 species of trees, shrubs and herbs and is one of the finest House include a 1970s “Gothic” aviary to the north west, a formal walled garden to the south, a Dutch Garden adjoining West Side House, and a giadino segreto with a summerhouse to the south-east.

The northern half of the Park contains an ornamental avenue with many species of Maple, the Tennis Court Garden, with an extensive collection of trees and shrubs, and the Keir Garden, in the north east corner, which contains many of the exotic foreign species and a “Guides’ Chapel” dating from 1838. A statue, Diana with Fawn, sited at the extreme north-west corner of the Park, is separately listed grade II.

The western part is taken up with a walled rose garden, avenues of chestnut and maple, and a recently restored formal kitchen garden. Two of the Park’s main features are the Azalea Dell, in Lady Jane’s Wood, and the Azalea Tunnel, both of which were created by the Corporation of Wimbledon. Lady Jane’s Wood, in the south-west corner, also contains mature beech and oak trees and a “wild garden”. An area at the extreme south-eastern corner contains a Belvedere known as the Retreat and was planted with various species of pine, cypress and maple in the 1970s [Ecology Handbook 29, p.72].
Further details of the Park are given in English Heritage’s description of the Registered Park and Garden and in publications by Milward and by Myson & Berry.

Buildings

CANNIZARO HOUSE

Cannizaro House from the north-west and the east

Cannizaro House is a two storey rendered building with a balustraded attic storey. The entrance front, facing east over gardens and car parking, has a projecting central section topped by a semi-circular pediment; the garden front, overlooking Cannizaro Park, has a two storey central bow with single storey projecting brick bays on each side; and the south front has a single storey portico overlooking an ornamental sunken garden. The House, which was added to the local list in February 1991, is now used as a hotel and has a modern northern wing of two storeys plus a mansard roof.

According to Milward, Cannizaro House was built in 1705, and until 1841 it was known as The Warren House. It is the original house to the park and formed one of two houses built by William Browne after he acquired The Old Park in 1705, the other being Westside House.

In 1738 The Warren House was purchased by Thomas Walker MP, Surveyor General to the Land Revenue, who passed it to his nephew Stephen Skinner in 1748. The Grosvenors, who bought it in 1769 and the Drax family, who owned it from 1827 until 1920, leased it to wealthy families who wanted to stay by the now fashionable Common.

On 14 October 1900 it suffered such a disastrous fire that the remains were still in a dangerous condition the following June. There appear to be few records of its original appearance. A drawing of the front elevation of 1812 shows a simple, even severe, classical front five windows wide with slightly lower side wings, but the garden front was apparently rather more welcoming, with a large central bow and long verandah [Milward pp.3 & 9]. It was rebuilt to more modern specifications (including improvements to the veranda overlooking the park) using insurance money to what the daughter of the previous tenant maintained was a different plan, but Milward considers that

the shape and position of the house shown on maps drawn before and after the fire proves that the present building is similar in plan and on exactly the same site as the old. Clearly the old foundations and some of the old walls were used, though the front façade which was most affected by the fire needed more radical reconstruction [Milward, p.21].

After purchasing the House from the Countess of Munster in 1948, Wimbledon Corporation leased it to Surrey County Council, who opened it as an Old People’s Home in 1950. But this was found to be an unsuitable use and from 1977 to 1980 it was used as a local Arts and Leisure Centre. But because of the cost of maintaining the building for a non-profitable use, the Council were keen to sell it for commercial purposes. Two public enquiries were held in the early 1980s and, despite the Secretary of State recommending that it continue as an arts centre, the Council sold it to Thistle Hotels, and “London’s first country house hotel” was opened in June 1987.
When Thistle Hotels bought Cannizaro House in 1987 it was in a very dilapidated condition and the new owners renovated and considerably enlarged it.

*The front was rendered a striking cream colour, the grand saloon beyond the pillared hall was graced with a fine marble chimney piece and a large oval painting in the ceiling; up the great staircase forty-six bedrooms of “different shapes and different characters” were provided, some with four-poster beds. [Milward p.29]*

**OCCUPANTS OF CANNIZARO HOUSE**

The House has been popular with “the great and the good” down the centuries not only because of its beautiful grounds but also because of the convenience of Wimbledon for those living in or commuting to central London. The “Pleasure Grounds” of Cannizaro Park, which originally afforded views across the entire Grosvenor estate as far as the woods of Combe Hill, was a great social asset to the influential occupants of Cannizaro House for over two hundred years, and although conservation area character assessments do not normally include details of the people who lived in the properties within the area under consideration, the influence of the occupants of Cannizaro House has been so considerable on the way Wimbledon has developed over the centuries (and also in the history of the nation) that brief details seem justified on this occasion. The following list of occupants is largely based on Milward’s *Cannizaro House and its Park.*

1757-1785: The House was first leased from the Grosvenors by Lyde Brown, a Director of the Bank of England, Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and a collector of Greek and Roman antiquities, including over 50 statues.

*The collection became one of the sights of London. Numbers of people called at Cannizaro to see it, though some came away unimpressed. They complained that the display was ‘too cramped and unsuitable’. So it is likely that the house did not have a gallery in which the statues could be shown to advantage. Certainly ‘several urns purchased at Rome in 1763’ were kept in the garden at Wimbledon.* [Milward p.6]

In 1785 Brown sold his collection to Catherine the Great for £22,000, but he is reported to have died of a “fit” when informed that he would only receive half the money. The greater part of the collection is still at the Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, and some of the remainder in the British Museum and at Petworth House.

1785-1806: The next tenant was Henry Dundas MP, first Viscount Melville, who became Home Secretary under Pitt and then Secretary for War and First Lord of the Admiralty at the time of the Napoleonic Wars. During his tenancy Cannizaro House became one of the leading social centres within easy reach of central London. George III would stay there when reviewing his troops on the Common and the Prime Minister regarded it as his second home. In 1801 Dundas leased Cannizaro House to the new Prime Minister Henry Addington, but in 1806 Dundas was impeached for high treason for “irregularities in the accounts”. Although acquitted, he was obliged to move briefly to a small house near the Crooked Billet before returning to his Scottish estate. The beeches of Lady Jane Wood were planted by Dundas in memory of his second wife. In 1806 the Earl of Aberdeen, who later became Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister, occupied the house for a brief period.

1817-1841: Francis Plamonte, Count St Antonio and the Duke of Cannizaro (apparently after the village of the same name in Sicily) leased the House having arrived in England as “Minister of the Two Scillies” at the Court of King James. He and his English wife were a colourful couple and held concerts and entertained many famous people, including Mrs Fitzherbert, the Duke of Wellington and Napoleon Bonaparte’s brother. In 1833 the Count left his wife and returned to Italy, and when the Duchess died in January 1841 the contents were sold off and the house was left empty. Because it was unoccupied during the 1841 census, it was christened “Cannizaro House” by the enumerator. This error and various alternative spellings - Cennezero in 1865, Canazara in 1871 - were perpetuated until 1874, when it became finalised as “Cannizaro”.
1842-1879: Arthur Eden, a senior government official who moved from the Grange, on Southside, lived there with his family and sixteen servants, but from 1854 to 1860 the house appears to have remained empty except for two months in 1854, when Maharajah Duleep Singh, the sixteen year old deposed Maharajah of the Punjab, stayed there before he moved to larger premises at Roehampton. From 1860 to 1879 John Boustead, an Army Agent from Ceylon, lived there with his wife, six children and twenty-four servants until his tea plantations were ruined by disease.

1879-1896: During her stay, Mrs Schuster, whose husband had been a Director of the Union Bank of London and Chairman of the London and Brighton Railway, considerably enlarged the house to accommodate garden parties of a thousand guests or more, including the Prince and Princess of Wales, Henry James, Oscar Wilde, Max Beerbohm and the publisher John Murray, who lived off Parkside. Distinguished guests watched "Pastoral Plays" performed in a glade in Cannizaro Wood, while on other occasions she played host to Ragged School Children and other parties of poor people.

1896-1920: Because of the 1900 fire Thomas Mitchell CB, a Colonel in the Volunteers, had to rebuild the house four years after moving in, and he left shortly after its reconstruction to live at The Grove, Wimbledon Park. He was followed in 1904 by John Savile, fifth Earl of Mexborough, who was a member of the MCC and Hurlingham, a Buddhist and a man "of considerable literary attainments". After his death in 1916 the house was used as a convalescent home for soldiers wounded in the First World War. It then reverted to the ground landlord, Sir Reginald Plunkett-Erle-Drax, an Admiral and the Director of the Royal Naval Staff College at Greenwich (and the author of a book on solar heated swimming pools).

1920 to date: In 1920 Drax sold the House and Park to E Kenneth Wilson, a wealthy ship owner and an Underwriter at Lloyds. Wilson and his wife were also members of the Royal Horticultural Society and were attracted to Cannizaro because of the grounds, which they greatly enhanced. The Park was once again used for social events, such as garden parties, Guide camps and Home Guard exercises during the 1939-45 War. In 1948, Wilson’s daughter, the Countess of Munster, sold the House and Park to Wimbledon Corporation.

Character

The House and Park form a unified composition located discreetly behind housing on three sides and within the wider public open space of the grounds of Wimbledon Golf Course and the Common. The Park has been carefully landscaped to shield views of any buildings which might disturb the impression of limitless countryside. This relationship should be protected against any development which might intrude unsympathetically on this rural idyll so close to the centre of London.

The allotment the north-west of the Park

The part of Wimbledon Common and the Royal Wimbledon Golf Club which adjoins Cannizaro House and Park enjoys several forms of statutory protection, including designation as Metropolitan Open Land, a Green Corridor, a Site of Special Scientific Interest, and a Site of Importance for Nature Conservation. It is therefore extremely unlikely that any changes will occur to the Common which could threaten the character of the Conservation Area or the Registered Park.

This sub-area follows the boundaries of the Registered Park, which is included on English Heritage's list of historic parks and gardens and is designated grade II*. Although parks and gardens included on the register enjoy protection under local plan policies, they do not have
the level of statutory protection given to scheduled monuments, listed buildings and conservation areas. Inclusion of the Park within the Conservation Area therefore provides additional protection.

ALLOTMENTS

To the north-west of the Park are some allotments approached off Camp Road. They are charmingly rural and unkempt, and at the southern end there are several cottages. The eastern building forms a semi-detached one-and-a-half storey pair in stock brick with ornamental eaves, and the western one is single storey and may have formed the outbuildings to its neighbour. They are screened from view behind poplars and a high hedge.

Preservation and Enhancement:

Care will need to be taken to ensure that the attractiveness of the landscaping and historic features are not diminished by the special events which take place regularly in the Park or by maintenance work.

Cannizaro House is located in a prominent position overlooking both the Park to the west and the gardens to the east. In its conversion to a hotel, the building underwent alterations which might not now be regarded as appropriate. Care should be taken to ensure that any future alterations and extensions do not erode the architectural and historic integrity of the building or its setting.