

HISTORY OF THE CANONS ESTATE

By Howard Napper

Did you know ?

‘Canons’ refers to the canons or monks of the Augustinian priory of St Bartholomew in Smithfield, London who owned the land until 1543. Tile making was the first known activity taking place on the land known today as Canons Park. It started in Roman times. Manor houses existed from 1260.

In 1544 Sir Hugh Losse acquired the estate and built a house. The Lake family, into which James Brydges, the first Duke of Chandos married, built a new house in 1713. After the second duke lost all his money in the South Sea Bubble the house was demolished in 1747 and a more modest mansion was erected. The family line died out when the third duke passed away without male heirs. William Hallett, the most successful cabinet maker of the 18th century built the present house in 1750 and occupied it for about 40 years.

In the 1900s the house repeatedly changed hands and the estate was subdivided for residential development. North London Collegiate School bought the house in 1929 and it is now their central building. Harrow Council bought the remaining land forming a public park and in the 1930s it laid out the George V Memorial Park. The gate piers at the Stonegrove entrance to Canons Drive are the only surviving remnants of that house.

Some of the remaining historical features in Canons Park include Whitchurch Avenue (not to be confused with the nearby road of the same name.) Some woodland on the east side is now called The Spinney. All that remains of Stanmore Avenue is a woodland strip west of the house. The Temple is a classical garden building erected between 1800 and 1838 and is in the Pleasure Ground of the estate.

In the 1900s the kitchen garden was established and had melons, fruit trees, tropical fruits and vegetable patches. The Memorial Garden was added in 1937 and included terracing, a shelter, a pool and gates.



The Temple, Canons Park (now painted white)

There are still some historical features outside Canons Park. These include land from Canons to Stanmore Common, Belmont and the grounds of Aylward School. Lake Grove Recreation Ground consists of woodland, grass and a stream. The grounds of North London Collegiate School are on the remains of the duke's formal pleasure gardens. These include ponds, fountains, canal and parterre. Beyond this were 27 acres of gardens, including a pavilion called The Banqueting House.

St Laurence church in Whitchurch Lane was partly rebuilt in the 18th century and used by the duke's family. Handel is reputed to have played the organ and composed there and Thomas Gainsborough painted Mr and Mrs William Hallett who were married in the church in 1785.

Land surplus after the creation of the residential Canons Park estate was used to make Seven Acre Lake, Basin Lake, Canons Drive, streams and greens.

Two men played a substantial part in the Canons Park history: firstly, James Brydges [1673-1744] became the first Duke of Chandos in 1719. It was estimated at one time that his fortune was over £100 million in today's money. He was paymaster of the armed forces abroad between 1705 and 1713. He handled all the money used for the armies, estimated at £3.4 billion today and suspicion was that corruption was rife in his office. Later research shows that Chandos had contact with Major General Cadogan, the Duke of Marlborough's chief of staff. Using this, Chandos would bet on when certain towns would fall by a certain date. Another scheme was exchange rate fluctuations. It was also thought Chandos took a 3% rake-off from the monies passing through his accounts.



Mr and Mrs William Hallett - Gainsborough

Secondly, Sir Arthur du Cros [1871-1955], who was managing director of Dunlop Tyre and Rubber, bought Canons in 1890 and in 1914 he arranged for the house exterior and gardens to be redesigned. He mixed in the highest circles with King George V staying at his house in Bognor. Du Cros married three times, being divorced once and widowed twice. From the 1920s he suffered a series of financial disasters and sold the house to North London Collegiate School in 1929.