



Kings Weston Action Group

Fighting for the future, protecting the past.

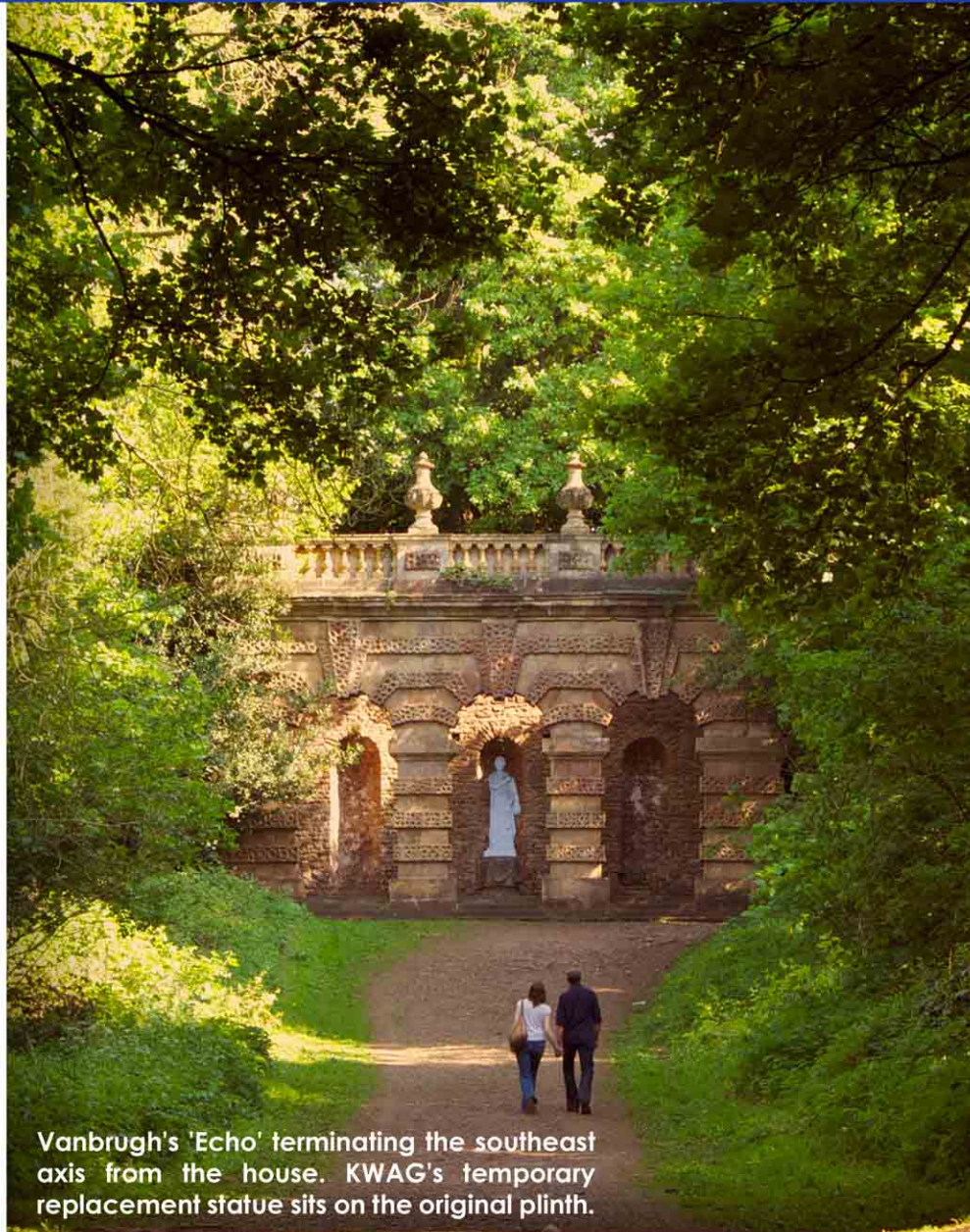


kwactiongroup@gmail.com
07811 666671

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KWAG, c/o 18-19 Londonderry Farm, Keynsham Road, Willsbridge, Bristol, BS30 6 EL
E-mail: kwactiongroup@gmail.com
Telephone: 07811 6666 71



Vanbrugh's 'Echo' terminating the southeast axis from the house. KWAG's temporary replacement statue sits on the original plinth.

The Kings Weston Action Group

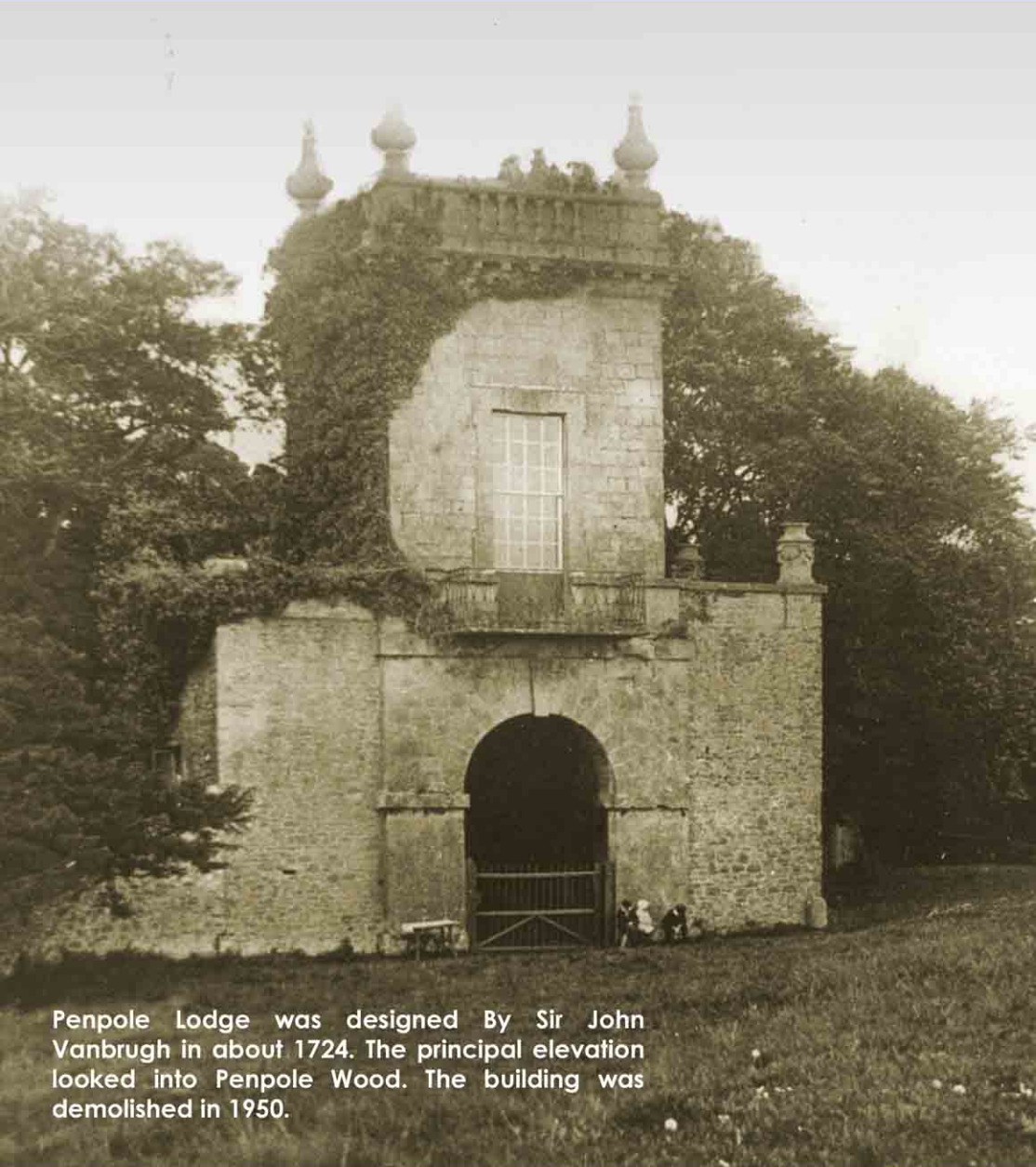
Kings Weston House is a nationally Important building designed by Sir John Vanbrugh - one of this country's greatest architects. It is largely overlooked by many people even in Bristol and, although leased as a conference venue remains at the heart of the estate. The park, first laid out in the 17th Century and now public parkland is full of three hundred years of garden history, but too long neglected and overgrown and many of its historic features already lost.

The Kings Weston Action Group has been set up to protect the Kings Weston Estate and House, fight for its future, and protect its past. We are an active group of volunteers formed from local people, users of the parkland, and conservation professionals who want to see a futures secured for this Grade II listed park and the Grade I listed house. The intention in this group is to forge a new future for the estate and to develop the grounds into a first-class green space for everyone to enjoy.

We hope to work closely with the community, the City Council and groups with a shared interest in our ambitions to:

- **Promote the historic importance of the park across the city,**
- **To take direct action to undertake maintenance and conservation work,**
- **Lobby the City Council and help inform new conservation and improvement plans**
- **Monitor the condition of the grounds, and historic house and garden buildings,**
- **Identify and apply for funding to achieve our goals.**

Do you use the estate? Do you live close by? Or do you just admire the historic house and grounds? If you share our ambitions please get in touch with us and add your name to our mailing list.



Penpole Lodge was designed By Sir John Vanbrugh in about 1724. The principal elevation looked into Penpole Wood. The building was demolished in 1950.

A park with a history

Although Kings Weston has a substantial prehistoric and medieval history it was the purchase of the house and estate by the Southwell family in 1679 that saw it transformed. Sir Robert Southwell was an important figure in the Court of King Charles II and held substantial estates in Ireland. His new acquisition would have been ideally situated between London and his Irish concerns. A well educated man Robert was appointed Secretary of State for Ireland in 1688; a position later inherited by his son Edward who succeeded him in 1702. It was Edward who started the process of transforming Kings Weston from a typical Tudor manor into a palatial modern mansion and park; powerful statements of political power and Enlightenment ideals.

Already by 1697 Edward's Father had been exploring remodelling of the old house, but it was Edward who commissioned Sir John Vanbrugh to rebuild it entirely. The new house enjoyed an unrivalled location with stunning views that required little embellishment, however, under Vanbrugh's instruction Edward erected a vast new viewing terrace overlooking the Severn 'Sea'. In the decade that followed the completion of the house in 1720 Southwell introduced many new ornamental features and undertook major work to enable the extension of the old pleasure grounds southwards across Shirehampton Park to the Avon.

On Edward's death in 1730 his son, also Edward is likely to have made further changes in the estate ensuring that they continued to confirm to evolving landscape ideas. It is possible that he hired Thomas Wright, then working at nearby Stoke Park, to deformatise the rigid framework of earlier fashions. A third Edward Southwell, later Baron de Clifford inherited the house in 1755 and continued to adapt the estate to keep up with changing fashions for more naturalised landscapes. Throughout the C18th the gardens, and especially the views, were highly regarded and formed an essential excursion for anyone visiting Bristol's Hotwells.

The estate was sold to the Miles family of Leigh Court in 1833. Few major changes were undertaken during their residency excepting a substantial remodelling of the house. The park was quietly maintained though its former fame dwindled throughout the century. On the outbreak of the First World War the house was given over for use as a military hospital and in 1918 Shirehampton Park was gifted to the National Trust. With the Death of Philip Napier-Miles his widow sold the remaining house and grounds to Bristol Municipal Charities in 1937.

Since this time the estate has been in a state of constant uncertainty. Proposals to fill the grounds with school, University, or Police buildings have all failed, though greatest damage occurred during WWII when the estate was used as barracks. Maintenance of the historic features was negligible and it was only in 1994 that an abortive attempt to understand and conserve the estate was undertaken. With the commitment of John Hardy the house was restored as conference and wedding venue in 2001, however no substantial maintenance has been undertaken in the park since.

The Registered Historic Landscape

In recognition of the importance of the estate English Heritage has scheduled the Kings Weston landscape with a Grade II listing. The territory covered by this listing is shown on these pages. 93 acres of Shirehampton Park was gifted to the National Trust in 1918, but the majority of the remaining 220 acres is in the ownership of the City Council. Managed as an adjunct to the Blaise Castle Estate it has no current Conservation or management plan and general maintenance has been sporadic. The archaeological significance of the estate has been only partially explored.



The Listed buildings

Key to the historic character of the estate is its ensemble of C18th buildings. The work of Sir John Vanbrugh is well represented here with a number of Grade I listed structures, and later buildings by Robert Mylne and others of grade II and II* listing are focused mainly around the Vanbrugh's house. The Ice house, kitchen garden pavilions and garden walls, all of 1764, and medieval Bewy's Cross are on the national register of Buildings at risk. Ownership of listed buildings is split between public and private ownership with the buildings at risk all within the ownership of the City. The estate sits within the Kingsweston & Trym Valley Conservation area.



Key to historic structures.

1. Kings Weston House, Grade I
2. The Loggia, Grade I
3. The Brewhouse, Grade I
4. The ice house, Grade II, building at risk
5. Home Farm, Grade II
6. Stables, Grade II*
7. Kitchen Gdn etc. , Grade II*, building at risk
8. Terrace of early C18th houses, Grade II
9. Napier Miles House, Grade II
10. Henbury Lodge, Grade II
11. The 'Echo', Grade II*
12. Park Lodge, Grade II
13. War Memorial
14. Wood lodge, Grade II
15. Shirehampton Lodge, Grade II
16. Penpole Dial, Grade II
- 17 Penpole Lodge - lost

The situation today

Today the estate sits on a knife edge between salvage and loss. As the setting for what should be one of the City's most important buildings the park forms an essential component.

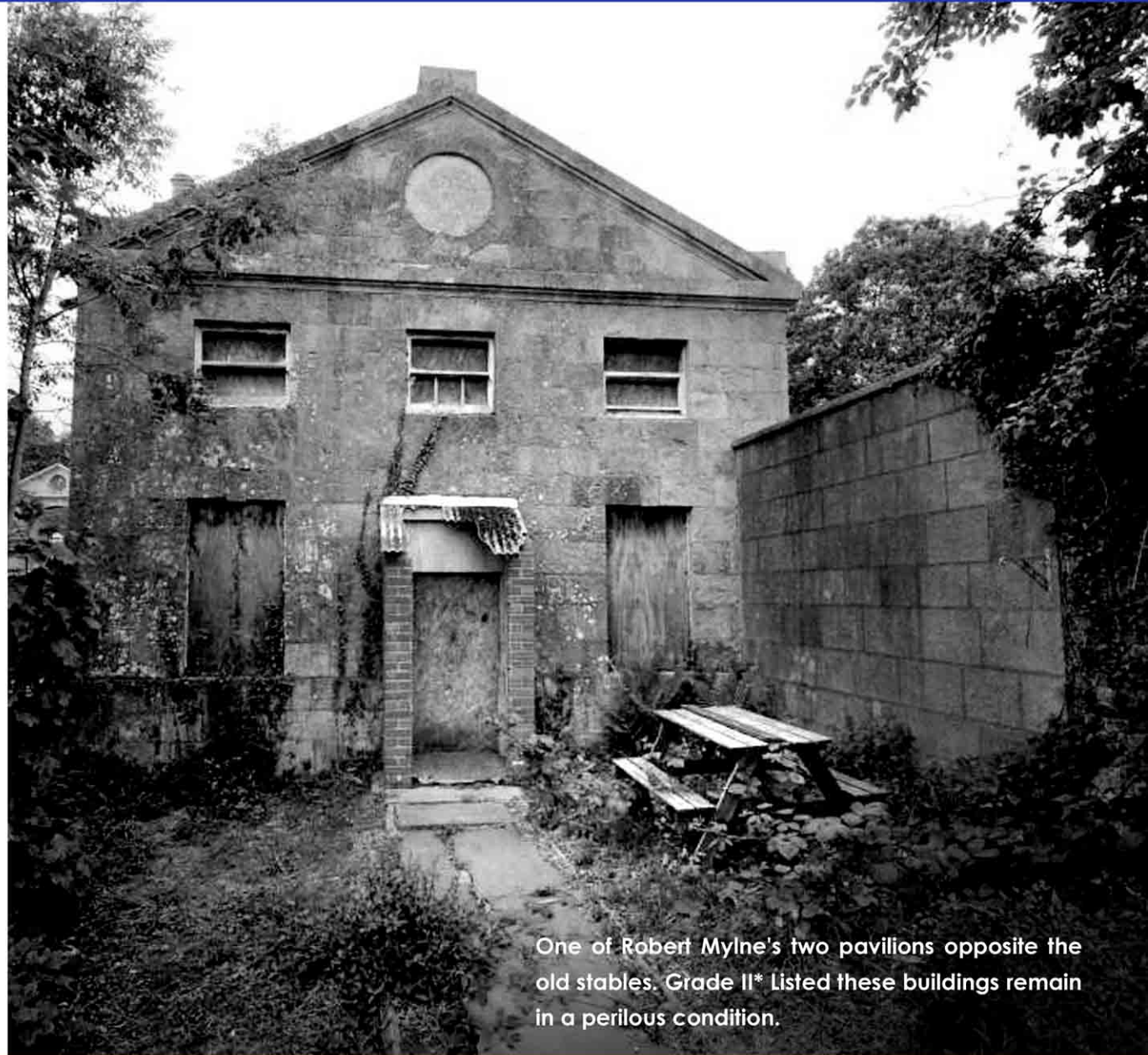
Although forming part of the demise of the Blaise Castle Estate the park at Kings Weston is neglected. It does not appear as part of any promotion of the Blaise estate, nor does it seem to exist in its own right. Whilst Blaise has been the subject of a major investment over the last decade few of the benefits have reached west of Kingsweston Hill.

Although small groups such as the Community Payback team and Kingsweston School undertake light maintenance works these are largely tokenistic. Regular maintenance of the estate appears limited to occasional mowing of the main lawn, and the slopes above Shirehampton Road. As such many of the historic features have suffered serious neglect and vandalism. Paths lie blocked by fallen trees or have vanished completely and sections of garden are engulfed with brambles and unchecked undergrowth.

Essential facilities for a park, such as dog waste and litter bins, adequate parking, and seating, or even simple signage are inadequate for a park of this size. Single dog waste and litter bins are provided to cover the whole 220 acres of publically owned parkland and are frequently found to be overflowing.

Vanbrugh's Penpole Lodge was lost in 1950 and although the house and some of the adjacent buildings have been saved from dereliction in private ownership others remain in urgent need of conservation. Robert Mylne's twin classical pavilions around the pond remain only as shells, continuing to decay with no plan for the future, and the ice house and former glasshouses lie dangerous and vandalised to the west of the former stables.

The use of Shirehampton Park as a golf course seems not to be incompatible with the historical landscape. With no historical assessment ever made of its remaining features and public access limited much damage has been done to the integrity of this part of the estate and its historic character seriously compromised.



One of Robert Mylne's two pavilions opposite the old stables. Grade II* Listed these buildings remain in a perilous condition.

The way ahead.

KWAG believes that urgent action needs to be taken to ensure the future survival of Kings Weston estate. Urgent maintenance needs to be undertaken to prevent further erosion of the historical features and character of the estate. The immediate need is for the implementation of some of the recommendations of Nicholas Pearson Associates 1994 report of the history and conservation of the landscape. For all its flaws in light of new research and a modern approach to conservation the 1994 report remains the blueprint for the immediate salvage of the park. KWAG intends to take a leading role in undertaking this practical work and have the support of a growing group of members.

Beyond this we are determined to peruse the commission of a new conservation and management plan that would identify the conservation and restoration requirements in balance with the modern needs of the community and park users. This needs to be derived from a more detailed study of the whole of the English Heritage designated landscape as well as through community consultation. KWAG has already begun work in both of these areas, but require support in these ambitions.

We hope to work closely with the City, its elected representatives, English Heritage and other interested groups to drive a new plan for the development of the estate as heritage and community asset. Fundamental to this will be the need to secure adequate funding for the initial planning stage, but also to ensure that any proposals can be fully implemented and maintained. We have begun discussions with English Heritage and the Heritage Lottery Fund to see how this could be successfully achieved.

We anticipate our commitment to these objectives needs to be sustained for at least 5 years before any major work is likely to be possible. In this period we hope to expand public knowledge of the estate, its history and importance and make interim improvements to signage, interpretation and facilities as opportunities allow.

Main Image: The southwest front of Kings Weston House seen across the lawns and showing the unique chimney arcade.



A Brief Guide

There is much published on the house and gardens, but much history and detail has remained undiscovered. KWAG has made huge advances in unraveling the evolution of the Kings Weston landscape. With a major reinterpretation of existing material and numerous new discoveries it is possible to redefine the importance of the house and park. The following pages identify the main features of the estate during four key periods. These are based around the best illustrations and plans available to us today.

Jan Kip produced an enormous quantity of aerial views for publication in Sir Robert Atkyns' 1712 publication *The Ancient and Present State of Glostershire*. The view of Kings Weston is the first accurate depiction of the estate and gives an important insight into the appearance of the old house, soon to be lost to Vanbrugh's new building.

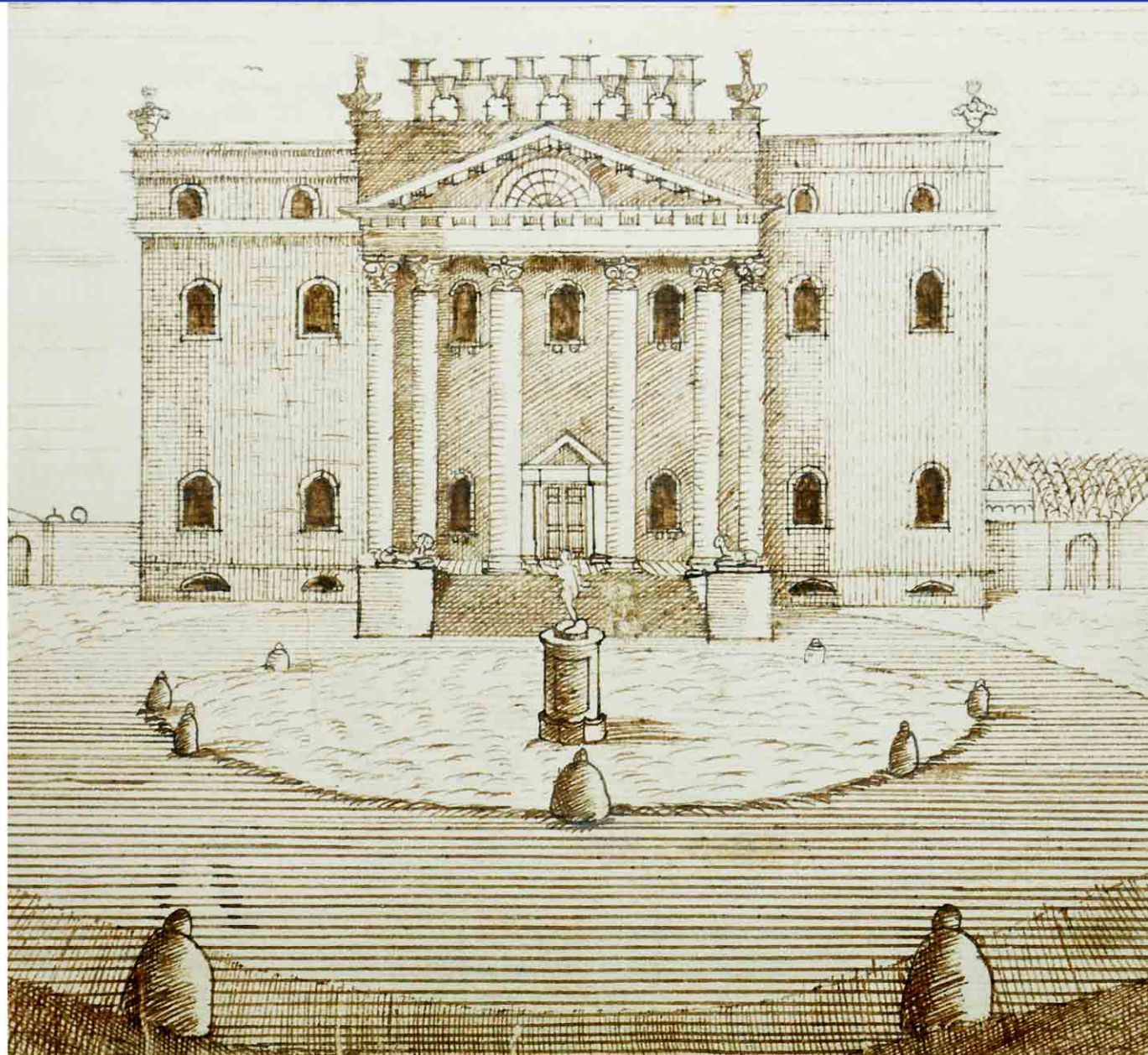
A beautifully accurate estate plan of 1720 by W. Halett shows the park immediately before it again underwent huge changes. After the completion of the house Southwell turned his attention to the gardens and many of its most notable features appeared after 1720.

Changing fashions, from the formal to the naturalistic again saw the estate transformed by 1772. Isaac Taylors depiction marks the end of a near-continuous period of change for the gardens and house and records features planned, but not yet implemented.

After the sale of the house to the Miles family in 1833 evolution of the landscape slowed dramatically. However, with the advent of the C20th enormous changes threatened the house and estate. The 1953 Ordnance Survey Plan shows the dramatic expansion of suburbia almost lapping at the foundations of the house itself.

These pages are not intended to be a comprehensive gazetteer of everything known about the estate, but give a small glimpse of what is, what was, and what could be once again.

Main image: The Great Court shown in a drawing of 1746 held in the Bodleian, Oxford. The walled court gave a formal context to the main front of Vanbrugh's house.



1. The Tudor mansion probably replaced a medieval manorial complex of which the foundations of a chapel to the east of Kings Weston Lane was once part.

2. The orangery, built around 1705 in the classical style was stocked with many varieties of peach, nectarine, plum, grape, 'apricock' as well as figs.

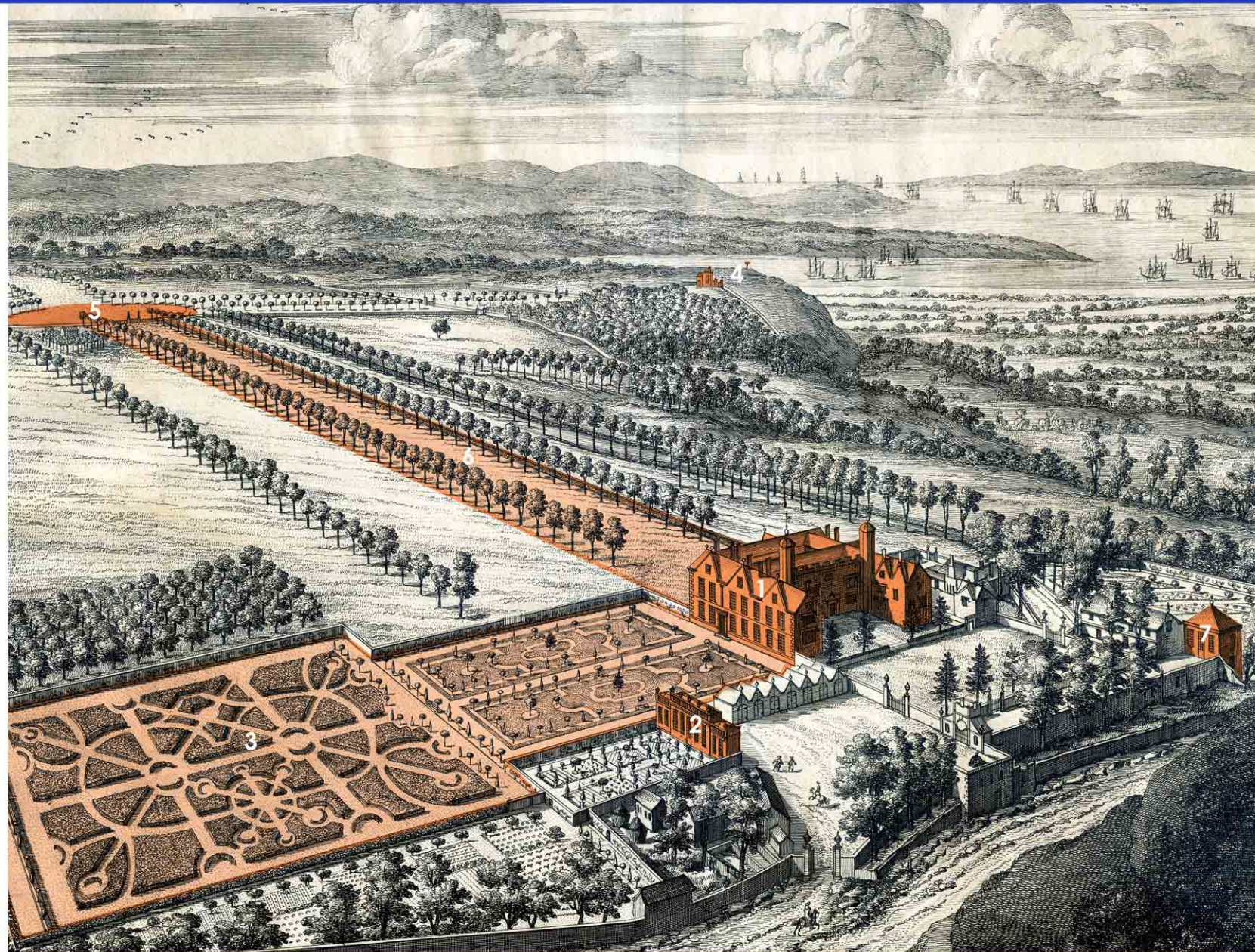
3. Formal gardens were laid out symmetrical to the gabled southwest front of the old house. These fashionable parterres and 'wilderness' gardens were created in the late C17th and a further grove was added to the ensemble in the decade after Kip's depiction.

4. Penpole Point was common land but was also in a prominent landmark for shipping entering the Avon. The dial, already old by the time the Merchant Venturers expended £5 on it's repair in 1668, was probably constructed as a permanent seamark. An early incarnation of Penpole Lodge is shown beyond the boundary of Penpole Wood and beside it a set of ornamental gates.

5. The Circle formed the focal point of a number of radiating avenues stretching across the landscape. It was an important stage in the formal approach to the house.

6. The main avenue created an imposing ordered setting to the house that, like the other avenues, emphasised the extent of the formal landscape. Kip shows tall gate piers at the end of the avenue, but the drive actually passes to the north.

7. The banqueting house was constructed in 1705 and built of brick. With extensive views out over the Severn and over the Bowling



1. Vanbrugh's new baroque house has been completed and, although of a similar footprint, sits forward of the original location.

2. The Great Court, the formal setting for the main front of the house contained the lead statue of Hercules, now at Goldney House. Vanbrugh proposed a fortified fosse and gateway echoing the 'castle air' he intended for the house.

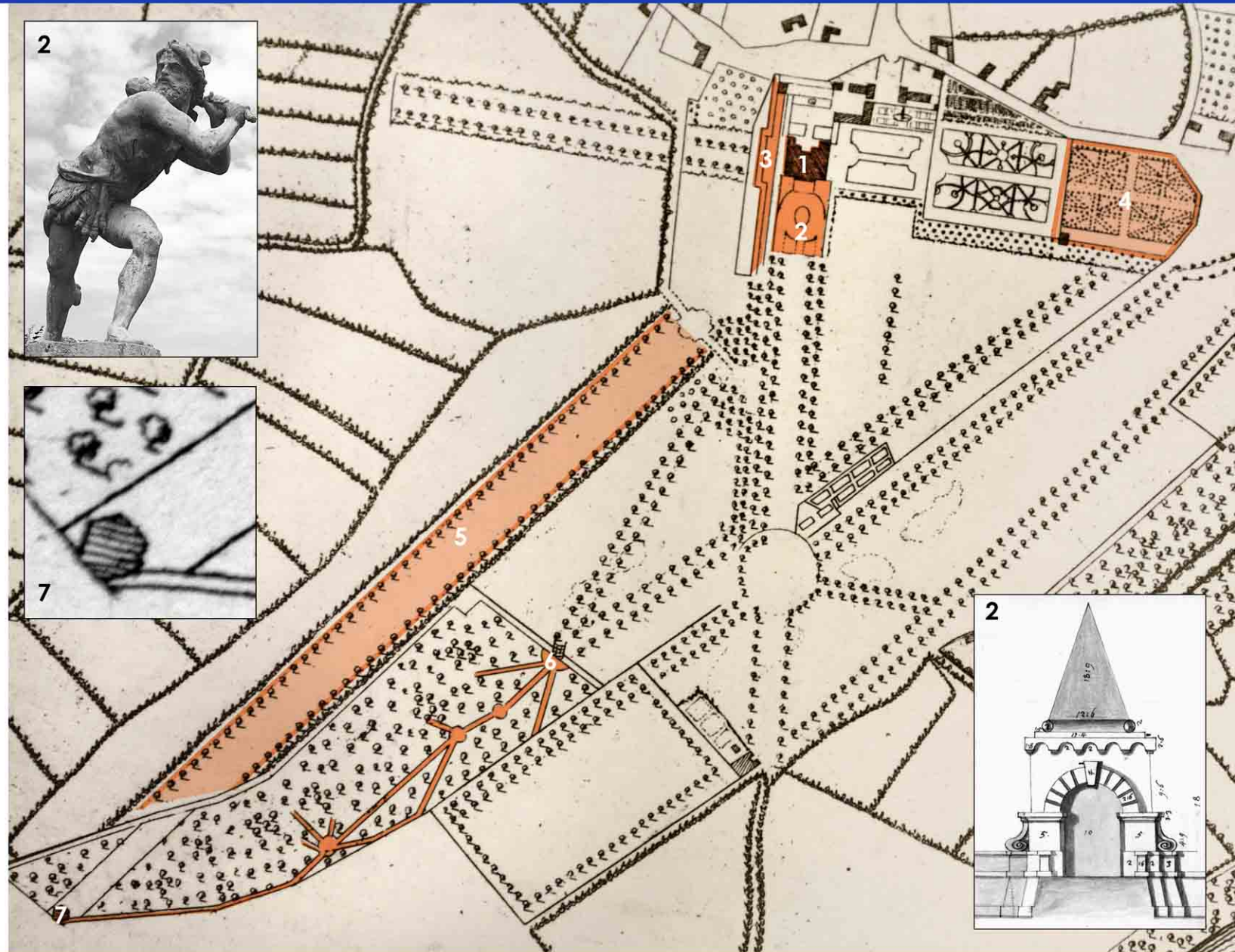
3. The Terrace was colossal. Echoing a renaissance fortification it stood in parts in excess of 20 ft above the natural slope. It gave spectacular views over the Severn. The loggia, built later, sat square at the northern end. The terrace was pulled down later in the C18th and the area landscaped.

4. The Grove was added to the sequence of formal gardens. Part of Kingsweston Hill blocked further development in this direction before the top of it was sliced away. 30ft of rock was removed from it shortly after 1720. The 'echo' was built subsequent to this huge undertaking.

5. The avenue towards Penpole Point must have been recently added in 1720 and followed the bottom of the hillside before cutting through Penpole Wood.

6. Formal paths were cut through Penpole Wood with a number of circular saloons and radiating paths. Statues or other elements probably formed a focus for the saloons.

7. The Hexagon. Not to be confused with Penpole Lodge this structure was constructed lower down the slope and accessed by a ramped path from the upper path. It formed the termination of the avenue from the main house and is would have enjoyed views back out towards Avonmouth.



1. In common with the rest of the estate all formality has been swept away and the alignment of the garden axis changed to match Vanbrugh's house. The Echo and a viewing terrace over Shirehampton Park now terminate the view.

2. A quarry garden has been planted in an abandoned north-facing working. A sinuous path runs through it and a circular viewing mound overlooks it.

3. Shirehampton Park was added to the landscaped estate shortly after 1720. By 1772 it forms a rolling landscape filled with woods and the occasional ornamental structure. Views over the Avon are it's major attraction.

4. An ornamental viewing mound was added to Conger Hill in 1724 though by this date it had lost six of it's original 8 radiating viewing corridors.

5. Lodges have been built at key locations at the perimeter of the estate.

6. Vanbrugh's Penpole Lodge, c.1724, appears for the first time at the end of the upper path through the woods.

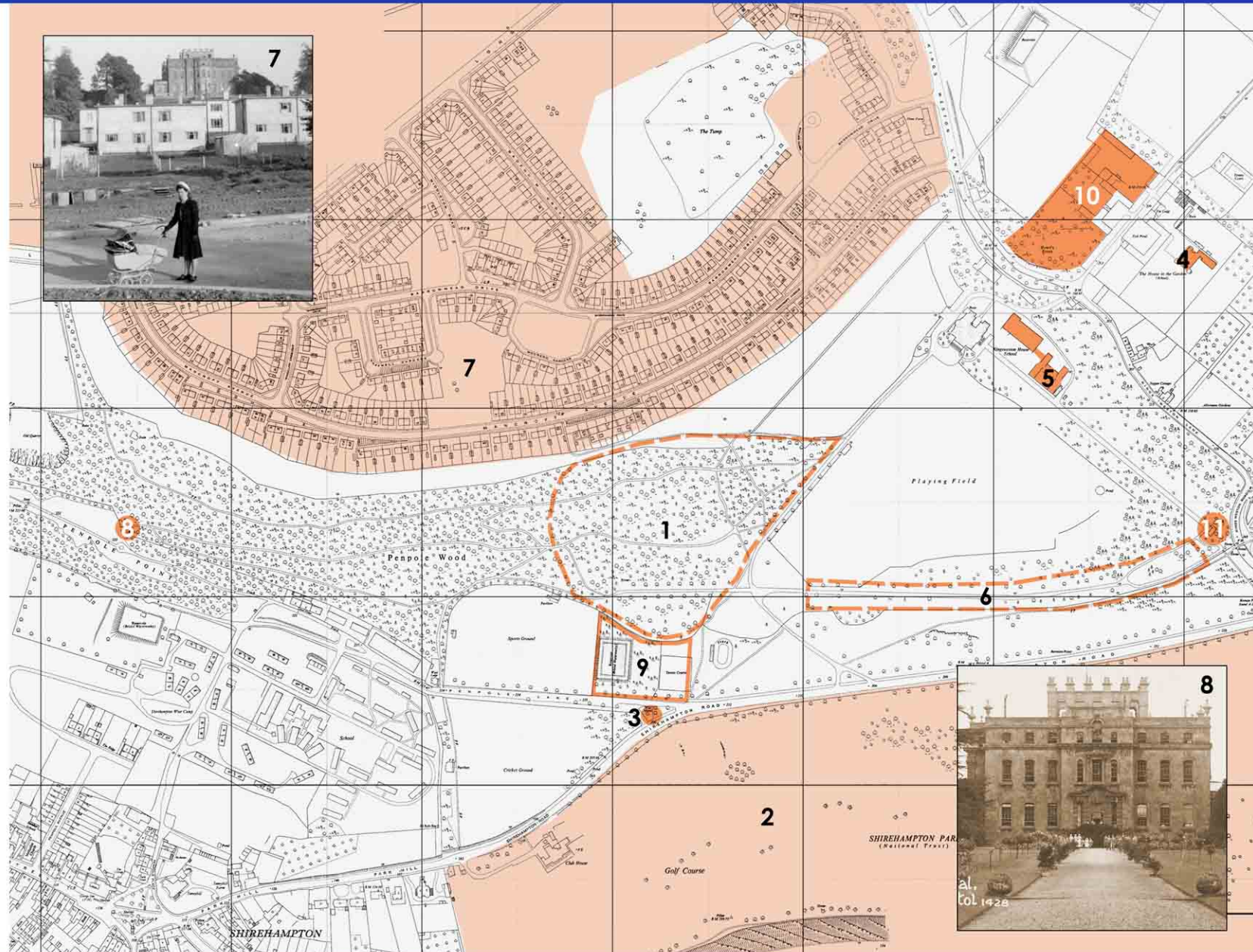
7. A rustic semi-circular arbor is just one feature on the new lower woodland path. This, the quarry garden and mound may be the work of Thomas Wright.

8. Robert Mylne made major revisions to the house in the 1760s and also designed the new stables and kitchen gardens all focused around an ornamental square pond.

9. A menagerie, a fashionable addition to any C18th garden, was created close to Home Farm. With an arcaded building, courtyard and small paddocks it may have homed a collection of more exotic animals and birds.



1. Victorian planting and C20th neglect have seen this once-open area now incorporated into Penpole Wood.
2. In 1918 Shirehampton Park was gifted to the National Trust. Since then it has been leased as a golf course and the historic character seriously eroded.
3. Shirehampton war memorial was constructed at the head of the old avenue leading to the house following. The Great War. The house operated as a hospital for troops during that conflict.
4. In 1937 Mrs Napier Miles moved from the house into a new house in the walled garden. More recently it has expanded in use as a special school.
5. After the sale of the house and remaining park to Bristol Municipal Charities in 1937 a project to re-house QEH school here was well advanced when war was declared. The buildings were never completed.
6. Remains of WWII barrack huts still pepper this area. During the war the park homed many American and Free Polish troops.
7. Lawrence Weston estate was constructed in the late 1940s to meet huge post-war demand for homes. This irrevocably damaged the setting of the house.
8. After much neglect Penpole Lodge was demolished in 1950 as unsafe.
9. Modern incursions have begun eating into the parkland and ownership of the land fragmented
10. In 1960 the decaying stables were rescued by conversion to a police station. The surrounding yards lost to nature.
11. Bristol Buildings Preservation Trust saved decaying 'Echo' in the 1990s, but it's classical statue has never been recovered.



Towards a new beginning...

Support for KWAG from heritage professionals and architects has been immediate, and strong local interest and support has been developed through Shirehampton Community Action Forum and other community organisations. Having a regular presence on the estate has enabled us to broaden interest in our ambitions to residents of Lawrence Weston, Sea Mills and park users from much further afield. The majority of views so far expressed have been overwhelmingly positive and the establishment of KWAG has shown that there is a large group of people who really care about the estate.

KWAG has begun collecting ideas and suggestions from people for how they would like to see the park evolve in the future. So far we have received a huge response and suggestions have included such simple actions as the instillation of more waste bins and more information about the history, to much more ambitious ideas to create new facilities and replace old features. We recognise that not all of the ideas we are collecting are possible or achievable, but we intend to maintain this list to inform how KWAG's own relationship to the project might change and new directions we might consider exploring.

We hope that enough support will continue to grow and that KWAG can be instrumental in establishing a framework to secure the irreplaceable and develop the inspirational.



Main Image: In April 2011 KWAG launched its appeal for information to relocate the statue lost from the 'Echo' by recreating it in card.



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Group

KWAG, c/o 18-19 Londonderry
Farm, Keynsham Road, Willsbridge,
Bristol, BS30 6 EL

E-mail: kwactiongroup@gmail.com

Telephone: 07811 6666 71



**Vanbrugh's Kings Weston House
seen from the garden.**