

Old Lodge

by Max Lankester

When Charles I enclosed the Park between 1635 and 1637 a number of buildings already stood within it. These included two farmhouses: Hill Farm, close to where Holly Lodge now is, and Hartleton Farm, which stood on the slopes of Spankers Hill Wood, within a few yards of the modern Pen Ponds car park. Later known as "Old Lodge", it was to become one of the most significant buildings within the Park.

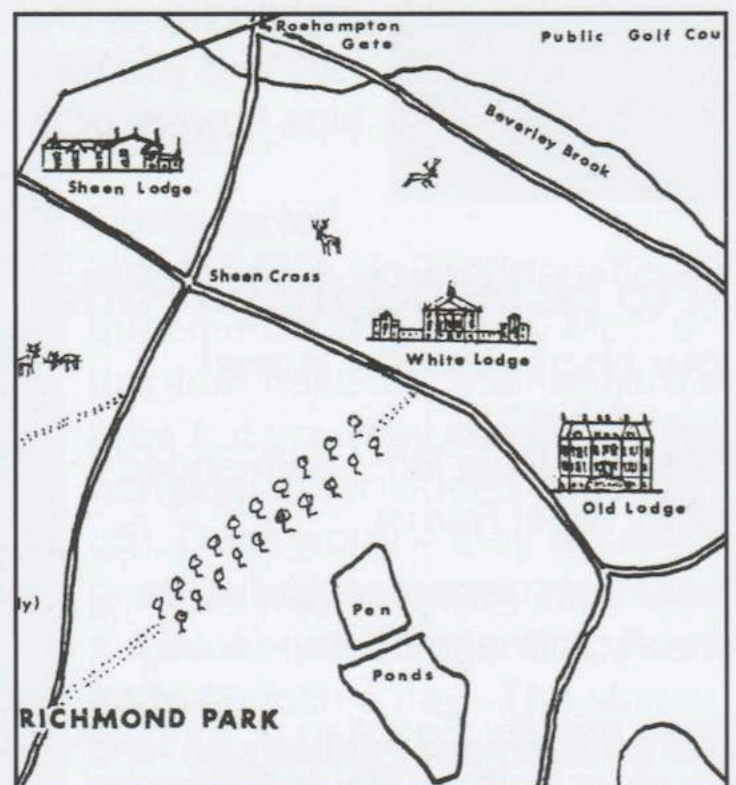


For several decades it served as the official residence of one of the two Keepers of the Park, who carried out much of the day-to-day work of the Ranger. Its heyday came in the 18th century, when it became the weekend home of Sir Robert Walpole, who is generally regarded as the country's first prime minister. Sir Robert's son, Lord Walpole, was appointed Ranger in 1727, but it was Sir Robert who called the shots and who made use of Old Lodge.

The building had become very run-down, and Sir Robert spent a good deal of money on renovating and enlarging it. He also created a pond in its grounds.

Sir Robert seems to have used the Lodge for two reasons. First, he habitually hunted in the Park with King George II, and the Lodge provided a useful place to stay. But he also found that he could get through much more official work when he could escape the many interruptions he would suffer when in central London. A House of Commons fact sheet notes that the 5-day working week of the House dates from Sir Robert's time, when he preferred to be in Richmond on Saturdays rather than in Westminster.

Sir Robert was also able to live openly at Old Lodge from the late 1720s with his mistress, Maria ("Molly") Skerritt. Walpole is known to have incurred the displeasure of Queen Caroline on at least one occasion when his presence with Maria at the Lodge meant he was not able to respond quickly to her summons.



*18th century lithograph of Old Lodge (foreground) and White Lodge (background)
Map and image from John Cloake's 'Palaces and Parks of Richmond and Kew, Volume 1'*