

SUTHERLAND GROVE CONSERVATION AREA RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION

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A 'Potted Guide' to the history of the Wimbledon Park Golf Club land & the AELTC (**All England Lawn Tennis Club**) Proposals

See also: <https://www.savewimbledonpark.org/> including <https://wimbledonsociety.org.uk/planning-environment/aeltc-planning-application-a-short-history/>

This issue has become more & more complex. Happy reading...

- **18th Century** Wimbledon Park started life as a Capability Brown landscape. A huge area – extending right up to Parkside, next to Wimbledon Common.
- Sections gradually sold off, eg to create the large villas east of Parkside
- **Late 19th Century** the **Wimbledon Club** bought their site.
- **Early 20th Century AELTC** bought their current site (west of Church Rd) early 20thC. LBM (**London Borough of Merton**) came by the rest of the remaining park. Part of this was leased to become **Wimbledon Park Golf Club (WPGC)**, the remainder being the public park we now enjoy. WPGC site is 2-3 times larger than the public park.
- **1993** Merton decided to sell the WPGC land. AELTC bought it, amidst huge public opposition & outcry, taking on the WPGC Lease. The price was reputedly low because AELTC signed Covenants with LBM, agreeing not to 'develop' the land & also to create a lakeside walkway once golf ceased on the site, (ie when the WPGC Lease was due to end – 2041).
- The whole park area is MOL (Metropolitan Open Land – Urban 'Green Belt')
- **2018(ish)** AELTC made moves to persuade WPGC Members vote to allow the Lease to be terminated early. The pay-off to each member to vote for this was reputedly £85,000.
- The Wimbledon Championships 'Qualies' (Qualifying rounds) had been held at the prestigious BofE (**Bank of England**) Sports Ground. 2018(ish) BofE decided to sell this land. AELTC were rumoured to be the preferred bidders. The Covid Pandemic put a stop to the sale-plans. Rumours began to emerge that AELTC wished to move the 'Qualies' to its Wimbledon Pk (WPGC) site.
- **2021** there were 3 'Consultations' on their proposals. In reality these appeared to be just a gradual unveiling of already-firm proposals. The plans, incl. no. of courts, expanded in each. The 3rd 'Consultation' unveiled plans for an 8000-seater 100' high tennis stadium + 38 grass courts – all to be squeezed on the WPGC site. A 'public' (in reality just 'permissive') park was proposed at the southern end of the site, where much of the land is too hilly for flattening for tennis courts. This permissive park would house a 30,000 sq ft maintenance hub for the *whole* site, contain a substantial car-

park (for the Championships) & 9km of hard-surfaces roads for maintenance-vehicles etc

- AELTC proposed a 'boardwalk' round (within) much of the lake, with little of the *lakeside* walk required in the Covenants. Having a boardwalk over the *water* instead of over *land* would allow AELTC more land to pack in its proposed 38 tennis courts.
- Much of the land would require levelling for the 38 courts + stadium. AELTC also proposed removing *all* topsoil. They also proposed de-silting the lake. A complex & problematic project with many uncertainties. All this would require substantial movement of HGVs & LGVs – with attendant Air Quality & Noise issues. A huge number of trees would be removed to accommodate tennis courts. More trees planted. However the CGIs used in the 'Consultations' & AELTC leaflets & newsletters since then are now acknowledged by AELTC to represent how the site *might* look 25 years after completion.
- **Summer 2021** AELTC's PA (**Planning Application**) was 'live' – both to LBM & LBW (**London Borough of Wandsworth**). AELTC appeared taken aback by the rapidly-rising no. of Objections – citing loss of MOL, visual blight, environmental degradation, loss of bio-diversity etc. AELTC employed a PR firm & began a 'Charm Offensive'. This included a plethora of 'site tours', 'Community Newsletters' & 'Nature w/es'. All these offered information highly-contested, eg by local lawyers & environmentalists such as respected Ecologist Dr Dave Dawson. AELTC's PR staff (with seemingly little knowledge of the project-details & the same contested information) began to 'collar' commuters at stations, to gain signatures on template-letters of Support for the Applications. These were uploaded in batches to the planning sites.
- Lawyers discovered the existence of the 1993 Covenants. (Was AELTC hoping these would remain 'buried'?) Doubt now also cast over the legality of the sale-process by LBM in 1993, through a legal case known as 'Day v Shropshire'
- The Report of LBM's own-appointed external Consultants (JAM Consult) was critical of much of the PA, incl methodology, lack of evidence for assertions, compliance-failures etc. Despite that Report, LBM finally Approved the PA in Oct 2023 (6-4) - the financial benefits to Merton facilities possibly too great to risk losing.
- LBW appeared to be able to assess the PA without that consideration & Refused it unanimously in Nov 2023.
- **Nov 2023**, the Leader of LBM wrote to AELTC to ask how they would ensure their (Approved) plans complied with the 1993 Covenants. AELTC has not as yet provided an answer.
- **Jan 2024** – the next step was for the Application to be considered by GLA (**Greater London Authority**). They received all Application docs from LBM & LBW & had until the end of January to decide whether to Refuse it outright, or assess the Application again themselves from scratch. They decided the latter. This process is separate from consideration of the 1993 Covenants or 'Day v Shropshire'.
- The GLA's own planning officers stated that the application was one of the most complex, policy-heavy and policy-defying applications they had ever had to deal with.
- The planning application generated a huge public interest. More than 22,000 people signed a petition by Save Wimbledon Park (SWP) opposing the development, & there were many thousands of specific planning objections as well as support for the application from various sources & individuals.

- The GLA took legal advice on a legal issue that all the Wimbledon Park land, golf course & lake might be held under a Statutory Public Recreation Trust, meaning land held in Trust by the Local Authority for public access. 10 days before the Public Hearing for the Mayor's decision, the legal opinion was given stating that the issue should be resolved by the Courts.
- The Deputy Mayor, Jules Pipe was to become the Arbiter of the Application. He took on this responsibility on behalf of the Mayor Sadiq Khan, who had recused himself. Mayor Khan did this on account of having expressed Support for the AELTC plans & been a guest of the AETLC Chair at the Wimbledon Championships Men's Singles Final in 2024. (He was similarly present as a guest in 2025 & 2026, but an invite does not appear to have been offered in years previous to 2024.) Notwithstanding the legal advice that the Statutory Trust issue should be first resolved by the courts, Deputy Mayor Pipe granted Approval, on the same afternoon of the morning Hearing, subject to the completion of a S106 planning agreement. That Agreement was completed, and the Permission issued in **November 2024**.
- **On July 21st 2025** the High Court dismissed a legal challenge by Save Wimbledon Park (SWP) campaign group, which wanted a Judicial Review of the planning decision on grounds that it was irrational & failed to properly account for material considerations that would make delivery of the scheme impossible. Mr Justice Saini rejected all the grounds & dismissed the case. SWP has been given permission to Appeal this decision. In fact Lord Justice Holgate said:

'The grounds of appeal are arguable with a real prospect of success. The case law on scheme benefits, deliverability, relevance, material considerations and irrationality merits review by the Court of Appeal.'

This Appeal is scheduled to be heard on 7th October 2026.

The description of the Amendments brought to the House of Lords in October 2025 & March 2026 (below) is of necessity very detailed

October 2025 Lords Banner, Grabiner, O'Donnell & Pannick proposed an amendment change (Amendment Number 250) to appear after clause 108 of the Planning & Infrastructure Bill, to be considered imminently by the **House of Lords (HoL)**. The amendment proposed make a change to the Local Government Act, allowing any purchaser of land from a local authority to take it free of an existing Public Recreation Trust. Crucially, this would be back-dated to 1980, allowing the purchase of the WPGC land by AELTC in 1993 to be included.

This would potentially have a profound impact on the legitimacy of the development proposed by the AELTC, **not to mention countless other open spaces designated for public use & recreation**.

Lord Gus O'Donnell is a Director of the AELTC. (As this is not a paid position, it does not have to be included in the Members Register of Interests.) As a former member of WPGC, he would also have been eligible for the £85,000+ pay-out made to each WPGC member in 2018 by the AELTC, in exchange for members voting to allow an early termination of the lease on the WPGC course land. (The lease was due to expire in 2041).

Jeremy Hudson, a director of Save Wimbledon Park Ltd said: *“This retroactive amendment defies the rule of law. It seems highly probable that this amendment is specifically intended to assist the AELTC in its proposed development of the golf course land, given that one of the sponsors of the amendment is Lord Gus O'Donnell, a Director of AELTC.”*

Members of the HoL from all parties spoke against this proposed Amendment.

‘Amendment 250 seems an undesirable bit of retrospective legislation designed to enable the All England Lawn Tennis Club not to have to negotiate fairly with the people it is disadvantaging as a result of its plans.’
Lord Lucas (Conservative)

‘This amendment has caused substantial concern that it erodes the protection of green space & removes long-standing public rights to green spaces, where the land is sold by a local authority, with or without public consultation.’
Baroness Young of Old Scone (Labour)

‘You cannot make decisions of this enormity without proper, full consultation, listening to voices, hearing what they have to say, responding to them & not just doing a steamroller job, which too many developments seem to want to do.’
Baroness Pinnock (Liberal Democrat)

The Government’s Minister of Housing in the HoL, Baroness Taylor of Stevenage, was against the proposed amendment. She told the HoL the proposed amendment:

‘will not resolve this issue effectively’ & would ‘create a contradiction to the procedures in the Local Government Act 1972’ while ‘operating retrospectively, which could have unintended consequences.’
The Amendment was therefore dropped before a vote was taken.

Baroness Taylor promised *‘full consultation’* before reconsidering any law change. This *‘consultation’* that never took place before the Amendment returned in a different guise (see below). She announced a *‘wider review of existing protections’* for public recreational space to *‘bring coherence to the legal framework, making protections more transparent & accessible, so communities can protect their most valued open spaces.’* She committed to *‘working at pace to find a solution that works for developers & councils while also safeguarding the local spaces that are most valued by communities’* & promised to *‘seek to resolve this issue in future legislation.’*

- **January 2026** there was another legal battle in the High Court between the AELTC & SWP over whether the former **WPGC** land is protected by a Statutory Public Recreation Trust. In March 2026, Mr Justice Thompsell ruled that the land was never subject to a Statutory Public Recreation Trust & had never been laid out or used for public recreation. The Court of Appeal granted SWP permission to challenge the decision. A hearing in this case is expected in the summer or autumn of 2027
- **March 2026** Lords Banner & Grabiner introduced another Amendment to reduce the protection of public land. Lord O'Donnell was not included this time, probably because of his Directorship with the AELTC. This time it was the English Devolution Bill to which they attempted to introduce ‘Clause 222C’, whose effect would be very similar to the proposed Amendment back in October 2025.

Baroness Taylor’s response was disturbing, appearing to be the opposite of her view in October 2025. Persuasive Lobbying appears to have taken place.

She said:

“We need a mechanism to close this lacuna in the law, while ensuring balanced decisions can be made in the public interest. In my view, Amendment 222C does just that.”

What about her promised commitment to '*full consultation*'? Not a priority?

'I will write to noble Lords who have taken part in these debates & inform them of how & when we are going to carry out that review & the likely timescales. I have been a bit busy with other legislation, I am afraid, so I have not got round to that yet.'

Members of the HoL who spoke out in October 2025 did so again in March 2025:

'At the heart of the amendment lies the travails of the All England Lawn Tennis Club. I declare an interest as someone who holds a very low opinion of that organisation, which seems to be entirely concerned with itself & its money & very unconcerned with the communities that it interacts with. That is a widely shared opinion, as noble Lords will know - although they may not agree with it. In this particular case, the AELTC has behaved abysmally, & it should not be advantaged by shortcutting what should be a careful review. I would like to see it soon & done with speed, but it should be an open public review, involving national bodies & others that are interested in the protection of public trusts & recreation rights to arrive at a coherent, well-agreed solution to this problem. To do it by way of an amendment in a Bill is far too limited. I urge the Minister to stick to her previous resolution.'

Lord Lucas (Conservative)

'In summary, Amendment 222C is a four-page amendment that proposes to grant the Secretary of State unprecedented power to permanently discharge statutory trusts from land once held for the public's enjoyment. It is being framed as a measure to resolve legal technicalities - we have heard that argument from the noble Lords, Lord Banner and Lord Grabiner. In truth, it seems to me that the amendment would be an assault on some of our nation's parks, sports grounds & green open spaces, which were created for the benefit of the local community.'

Baroness Pinnock (Lib Dem)

'The provision for consultation in the amendment is exceptionally thin & ill-defined. There is nothing here that I would recognise as getting in among the community & finding out what they care about & want. There is no provision for that kind of depth of research, particularly in the context of the issue we are talking about in Wimbledon, where the interests of those who actually live there seem to be ignored entirely.'

Lord Lucas (Conservative)

'This amendment is not just about Wimbledon. While welcoming the Minister's support in principle for the amendment, given that there is a degree of contention, I withdraw it now but will bring it back on Report.'

Lord Banner (Conservative)

The volte-face by the Government on this issue is truly disturbing, as is the apparent power of lobbying by those who may not have the best interests of the community at heart.

- **October 2026** The Appeal against the Refection of SWP's Judicial review of the planning Approval finalised by the GLA in November 2024 is scheduled to be heard on 7th October 2026.