



The Best of British Gardens

Andrew Baskott celebrates the remarkable life and gardens of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown on the 300th anniversary of his birth

The Shakespeare of gardening

“Your estate has great capability for improvement” was a phrase reputedly used so often to prospective clients by Lancelot Brown, it led to his nickname, ‘Capability’ Brown. But it wasn’t just the country estate’s that had great capability, for so too did Brown; a man described by a German prince as the “Shakespeare of Gardening”.

The fifth of six children, Brown was baptised on 30th August 1716 (his actual date of birth isn’t known), in the small stone-built church of St Wilfred, in the equally small village of Kirkharle, in deepest Northumberland. Born to William and Ursula Brown, the family lived on the Kirkharle estate owned by Sir William Loraine. His father was a yeoman farmer, while his mother was chambermaid at Kirkharle Hall.



St Wilfred’s, Kirkharle, where Brown was baptised in 1716. *Previous pages*, the cedar of Lebanon tree was one of Brown’s favourites, here one frames the view across the lake he created beside Vanburgh’s Grand Bridge and the lawns sweeping up to Blenheim Palace. Photos by Andrew Baskott.

Until the age of sixteen, Brown attended the nearby village school at Cambo, part of the neighbouring Wallington estate. His daily walk there took him across Wallington’s farmland; a natural landscape that perhaps had an unexpected and lasting influence on him.

On leaving school, Brown became Sir William’s head gardener’s apprentice. Working in the Hall’s kitchen garden, this was his first introduction to gardening. He stayed until 1739, when, aged twenty-three, he headed south to begin a career that would change not only his life, but the English landscape too.

By 1741, Brown had reached Stowe in Buckinghamshire, where he worked in the gardens of Lord Cobham who, at the time, was even wealthier than the king. He worked under the direction of William Kent, a founding father of English landscape design and whose ideas undoubtedly influenced him.

Within a year, Brown was Stowe’s head gardener and set about establishing his own naturalistic style. His first major undertaking was extending the garden’s Grecian Valley. Lord Cobham also loaned out his services to his aristocratic friends, further enhancing Brown’s reputation as a garden designer.

Following Lord Cobham’s death in 1750, Brown moved to Hammersmith, London’s market garden area. A year later he obtained his first major commission at Croome Park in Worcester-



Croome Park, described by Brown as a ‘hopeless spot’.

shire, the ancestral home of the 6th Earl of Coventry.

It was to be a watery challenge. Croome Park took its name from Crombe, the Old English word for ‘a winding stream’. Croome’s stream was sluggish and flowed through a shallow valley, creating a boggy landscape. Brown described it “as hopeless a spot as any in the island”. His solution to drain this watery ‘morass’ was to dig miles of culverts, and channel the water into a new lake and river. Brown’s serpentine ‘rivers’ were actually a series of lakes with the breaks between screened by clumps of trees, giving the illusion of a sinuous river meandering through the countryside.

While he had also designed the

house and church at Croome, he saw himself as a ‘place-maker’ rather than architect, and was at his happiest creating natural landscapes. Croome was Brown’s “first and favourite child”, and became a template for his works that followed.

With his reputation soaring, he found himself criss-crossing the country on horseback as England’s wealthy landowners clamoured for his services. These ranged from his surveying an estate and drawing up plans for buildings and landscapes but leaving his client to execute the design, to a full-scale commission overseen by a foreman or, for a premium, Brown himself.

In 1754, he began work at Burghley



Brown's bridge at Burton Constable; facing page, Brown's home – Fenstanton Manor.

House in Lincolnshire. Over the next twenty-five years he continued to make improvements to the former estate of William Cecil, Lord High Treasurer to Elizabeth I, and wrote: "I have had 25 years pleasure in restoring the monument of a great minister to a great queen".

In Oxfordshire, Blenheim Palace is one of Brown's finest examples of 'place-making'. Started in 1763, the estate's 2,000 acres were transformed on a grand scale. Thousands of trees were planted (among them Brown's favourite, the cedar of Lebanon), while parterres made way for lawns sweeping down to a magnificent new lake. Dug out entirely by hand, the huge

lake complemented Vanburgh's Grand Bridge and added to the existing Queen Pool. With an irregular shape and by damming the River Glyme, Brown created an expanse of water as if formed by nature.

His standing among England's aristocracy reached new heights when, in 1764, he was appointed Master Gardener to King George III at Hampton Court Palace. From his humble Northumbrian origins, he had now achieved royal approval.

There were few parts of England not touched by Brown's hand. In all he transformed over 250 estates, from Northumberland to Sussex, Norfolk to Devon, and practically everywhere in

between. He also made the odd foray into Wales, Scotland and Ireland, and many more estates copied his style.

Despite his great success and wealth, Brown had never owned his own home. An omission he rectified in 1767, with the purchase of a house in Fenstanton, Cambridgeshire; with it came the title of lord of the manor.

On 6th February, 1783, England's great place-maker died. The previous evening he'd dined with his old friend the Earl of Coventry, but collapsed while returning to his daughter's home in Mayfair. He was buried in Fenstanton's churchyard.

One of Brown's last commissions began in 1780 at Belvoir Castle in Leicestershire. However, his death meant his plans were never fully implemented. Recently rediscovered, they are now being used to complete his envisaged landscape.

Fittingly, the place of his birth is where one final piece of the 'Capability'



Brown legacy can be found. An undated plan by Brown for remodelling Kirkharle's parkland was discovered in 1980. In 2010, his design for a serpentine lake was brought to life.

It is testament to Brown's skill and vision that so many of his landscapes live on. His memorial perhaps best sums up his remarkable life by declaring "More than genius slumbers here". ■

To find a 'Capability' Brown landscape near you and details of events celebrating the 300th anniversary of his birth, visit www.capabilitybrown.org

'CAPABILITY' BROWN LANDSCAPE HIGHLIGHTS

Alnwick Castle, Northumberland NE66 1YU; www.alnwickcastle.com

Belvoir Castle, Leicestershire NG32 1PE; www.belvoircastle.com

Blenheim Palace, Oxon OX20 1PP; www.blenheimpalace.com

Burghley House, Lincs PE9 3JY; www.burley.co.uk

Chatsworth House, Bakewell, Derbys DE45 1PN; www.chatsworth.org.uk

Claremont, Surrey KT10 9JG; www.nationaltrust.org.uk/claremont-landscape-garden

Croome Park, High Green, Worcs WR8 9DW; www.nationaltrust.org.uk/croome

Hampton Court Palace, Richmond KT8 9AW; www.hrp.org.uk/hampton-court-palace

Holkham Hall, Norfolk NR23 1RH; www.holkham.co.uk

Ickworth House, Suffolk IP29 5QE; www.nationaltrust.org.uk/ickworth

Kirkharle Courtyard, Wallington, Northd NE19 2PE; www.kirkharlecourtyard.co.uk

Longleat House, Wilts BA12 7NW; www.longleat.co.uk/longleat-house

Petworth House, W Sussex GU28 9LR; www.nationaltrust.org.uk/petworth-house

Stowe Landscape Gardens, Bucks MK18 5EQ; www.nationaltrust.org.uk/stowe

Trentham Gardens, Trentham, Staffs ST4 8JG; www.trentham.co.uk/trentham-gardens