

Capability Brown at Belvoir Castle



Belvoir castle from the lake © Belvoir Castle

Lancelot 'Capability' Brown drew up plans for Belvoir Castle for the 4th Duke of Rutland in 1780, when he was aged 63. He never saw the results as the Duke's debts meant that work proceeded slowly and Brown died just three years later. Brown's dusty plans were only recently discovered, rolled up in the Belvoir archives.

Sitting high on a steep limestone ridge, Belvoir Castle commands 360-degree views over Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire. The first castle on the site was an 11th century stronghold, but by the time Brown went there, the castle was a more domestic 17th century house with formal Tudor gardens.

Brown had the estate surveyed, and advised on improvements to the house and estate, charging just over £500 in total (around £740,000 in 2015), which was eventually paid to Brown's executors. Although work was not completed in his lifetime, the garden and park follow the spirit of Brown's plan, which is being used to guide current improvements to the landscape.

Belvoir Castle: www.belvoircastle.com with particular thanks to Grace Milham for her help
Capability Brown and Belvoir: Discovering a lost landscape by the Duchess of Rutland and Jane Pruden, Nick McCann Associates Ltd, 2015

For more information about Brown and his work go to capabilitybrown.org/research

Capability Brown

Lancelot 'Capability' Brown (1716-1783) was born in the Northumberland village of Kirkharle, and went on to popularise the English landscape style, advising on over 250 large country estates throughout England and Wales.

Formal gardens gave way to naturalistic parkland of trees, expanses of water and rolling grass. He also designed great houses, churches and garden buildings, and was skilled in engineering, especially with water.

This guide was created as part of a festival celebrating the 300th anniversary of his birth. Find out more about the man and his work at capabilitybrown.org/research

Portrait of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, c.1770-75, by Richard Cosway (17421821)/Private Collection/Bridgeman Images.



In 1779 Brown's surveyor Jonathan Spyers made a survey of the estate, 'a very neat fair Drawing', which was discovered alongside Brown's plans. At that time the estate covered 3,928 acres, according to the note in Brown's account book, and the work cost £196 and 8 shillings (over £300,000 in 2015). He also documented making plans to alter the elevations of the house and his charge of £300 (nearly £430,000 in 2015) for his own journeys to Belvoir.



The rediscovered plan by Brown of 1780 © Belvoir Castle

Brown's plan

His original plan for the landscape included creating lakes, huge new woods, planting clumps and belts of trees and major earth works, such as smoothing out the castle mound and building an embankment to link it to a nearby hill. Rather than moving the nearby village of Woolsthorpe to improve the view, he incorporated it into his plan, partly screened by trees. He proposed new pleasure gardens, but kept the existing formal Tudor gardens, canal and Wilderness.

Brown also planned to create a 'chase', open land for hunting, and to reinstate Belvoir's free warren, for hunting with hawks, to reflect Belvoir's medieval past.

Work delayed

The 4th Duke had inherited large debts, made worse by his passions for art, gambling, women and entertaining. On being shown Brown's plans Walpole thought they were magnificent but, as he wrote to Lady Ossory, "I asked where the funds were to arise for I hear the Duke's exchequer is extremely empty."

This delayed work on Brown's scheme, and tree planting didn't start until 1782, a year before Brown's death. Two years later the Duke became Lord Lieutenant of Ireland for the huge salary of £20,000 (£28.6 million in 2015), leaving the estate in the hands of his manager Joseph Hill, who sold timber to pay for improvements. The Duke died of drink in 1787.

Capability Brown at Belvoir Castle



Capability Brown features

- 1 The Lakes
- 2 Bridge across the lake
- 3 Frog Hollow
- 4 View of Nottingham
- 5 View of St James's Church, Woolsthorpe
- 6 Tree planting and ride round Blackberry Hill

★ Eye-catcher

↑ Viewpoint

~ Ha-ha

🌲 Specimen trees

🌳 Woodland or copse

🌳 Parkland trees

🌱 Shrubbery

i Visitor Centre

☕ Refreshments

🚻 Toilets

P Parking

♿ Disabled Parking

400 yards

400 metres



Woolsthorpe Park and the lower and upper lakes © Belvoir Castle

Planting and pleasure grounds

By the time the 5th Duke came of age, debts were repaid and the family fortunes improved. Most of the perimeter belts of trees and some woodland had been planted by the turn of the century.

The pleasure grounds were laid out within the outline designed by Brown, though the planting is not his. A ha-ha separated the walks from the surrounding parkland and the Wilderness.

In 1788 three clumps of trees were planted, including Holywell Wood. The planting here is in Brown's style, with clump of oaks in the centre of a ring of beech and horse chestnut trees, but there is no evidence that it is his. The ground appears to have been built up before planting to help obscure the village from the east and the avenue from the castle.

Drives and rides

Brown proposed a private drive flanked with a double avenue and two rides – one grass and one gravelled – on the site of the current Woolsthorpe Avenue, but this was never implemented. The sweeping entrance from Harston on his plan may have inspired the current Brewer's Grove drive which dates from 1807.

Brown intended the old Park to become a mowing lawn of around 300 acres, surrounded by a ride within a belt of trees, to provide hay and fresh grass for the Duke's horses.

Embankment and lake

Brown's proposed embankment was built in 1801-4. A raised semi-circular Bowling Green was removed from the terrace, as it blocked light into the lower floor of the castle. The earth was used to build an embankment, providing a more level drive from Castle Hill to Blackberry Hill. The work took eight men two and a half years. The old chapel and picture gallery alongside were demolished at the same time.

Brown proposed a tunnel under the embankment to link the Woodland Garden and Old Park on the northern perimeter of the estate, but this was never implemented. By 1825 the 10.5 acre lakes had been prepared, with a five-arched bridge concealing a change of level between the two sheets of water.

Capability Brown at Belvoir Castle



The current Belvoir Castle, listed Grade I, dates from 1801-30, and is mostly by James Wyatt (1746-1813), fresh from working on Windsor Castle. The new chapel and the Castle's south-west elevation were chiefly designed by Frederick Tench, based on Brown's plans. The north and east wings were rebuilt by Sir John Thoroton in 1816 after a major fire, assumed to be caused by Luddites protesting against industrialisation.

Wyatt also designed a model farm for agricultural experiments in 1813. This included a dairy for Elizabeth, the 5th Duchess, who laid out the 8-acre kitchen garden. In 1906 the landscape architect Harold Peto (1854-1933) redesigned the Rose Garden, replacing the Victorian flowerbeds there.



Limes along Woolsthorpe Avenue and St James's Church © Belvoir Castle

Biodiversity at Belvoir Castle

At Belvoir Castle the parkland features support a variety of habitats including wood pasture and parkland, deciduous woodland, mixed broadleaved and coniferous woodland, traditional orchards and habitats associated with water bodies such as the reed beds surrounding the large lake.

The parkland surrounding Belvoir Castle contains the Briery Wood Heronry Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) -the largest heronry in Leicestershire. The heronry is situated in an area of mature oak and ash woodlands, with bracken and dog's mercury ground flora. See www.capabilitybrown.org/garden/belvoir-castle for further information about Briery Wood Heronry SSSI.



Woolsthorpe Park and the lower and upper lakes © Belvoir Castle

Belvoir Castle today

The castle remains the home of the Dukes of Rutland. It is open to the public and the estate runs a commercial shoot, corporate events and weddings.

Villagers planted limes along Woolsthorpe Avenue in 1977 to mark the Queen's Silver Jubilee and the avenue was completed by the estate in 2012, her Diamond Jubilee. The current Duke and Duchess continue to improve the estate guided by Brown's plan. The landscape at Belvoir is now listed at Grade II.