



Portrait of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, c.1770-75, by Richard Cosway (1742/1821)/Private Collection/Bridgeman Images.

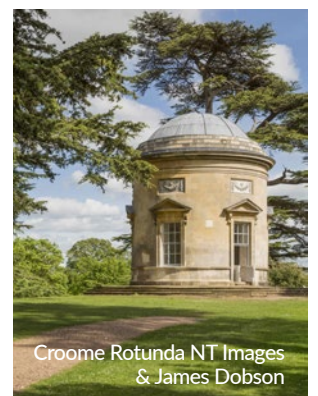


Capability Brown Festival

This guide has been created as part of a festival celebrating the 300th anniversary of the birth of Capability Brown in 1716.

The festival aimed to celebrate his work and encourage more people to visit and appreciate the landscapes he created. It was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and managed by the Landscape Institute.

To find out more about Brown's work go to capabilitybrown.org.uk/research. For information on the individual landscapes he created go to capabilitybrown.org.uk/map.



Capability Brown

Lancelot 'Capability' Brown (1716-1783) was one of the UK's most talented landscape architects, and he changed the face of Britain forever.

Born in the small Northumberland village of Kirkhale, Brown's name is today linked with more than 250 estates, covering 200 square miles throughout England and Wales.

Brown popularised the English Landscape Style. Formal gardens gave way to naturalistic parkland with trees, expanses of water and smoothly rolling grass. This style became fashionable throughout Europe and beyond in the 18th century.

His talents were not limited to landscapes. He also designed great houses, churches and garden buildings, and was known for his skill in engineering, especially with water.





Capability Brown Facts

His nickname

Brown's nickname 'Capability' is thought to have come from his habit of describing landscapes as having 'great capabilities'.

Birth and death

Brown was baptised on 30 August 1716 but we do not know his exact birthday, nor exactly where he was buried in 1738. A modern-day headstone marks the approximate place in the parish churchyard of Fenstanton, Cambridgeshire.

A man of many skills

Brown was a skilled water engineer, including complex drainage' schemes, and creating lakes covering up to 80 acres. He also turned his hand to architecture, designing mansions at Croome, Redgrave and Claremont.

Royal gardener

King George III appointed Brown as Royal Gardener for Hampton Court and St James's in 1764, with a salary of £2,000 a year. This allowed the family to live in Wilderness House in the grounds of Hampton Court Palace.

Account book

Only one of Brown's account books is known to have survived. It is mostly written in his own hand and lists clients and payments received and made. Held by the RHS Lindley Library, it is a major source of information about his work.



East Lawn © Compton Verney

Natural landscapes

A landscape garden may often look completely natural but is, in fact, manmade. Brown believed that if people thought his landscapes were beautiful and natural, then he had been successful. He created gardens for pleasure that were also practical.

Brown's genius was in his ability to quickly see how a work of art could be created out of parkland or an existing formal garden. His workmen moved huge amounts of earth and diverted streams or rivers to create the natural effect that he wanted. He drained land for grazing and planted woods for timber, so that the estate was productive as well as attractive

A humble background

Brown was from a humble working family but had some education before training in gardening. His talent blossomed in the 1740s while he was Head Gardener at Stowe, Buckinghamshire, then the most famous garden of the day. At Stowe he replaced the ornate parterres and formal gardens with a smooth open lawn. His first masterpiece there was the romantic Grecian Valley. This included classical buildings, reflecting the fashion for antiquities, which became popular as rich young men went on the 'Grand Tour' of Europe as part of their education.

Business Success

Brown set up his own business before he left Stowe in 1751. He combined his artistic talent, technical skills in architecture, engineering and landscaping, with sound business sense and scrupulousness.

His friendly nature and way of easing difficulties led to an impressive list of clients that included six prime ministers and half the House of Lords. In 1764 he became the Royal Gardener to King George III. He built up a successful business with an annual income equivalent to over £20 million today. Brown was a driven man who criss-crossed the country for his work, but his letters show how dearly he loved his wife and children. His happy family life was interrupted by bouts of illness, but he continued to work hard until his death in 1783 aged 67.



Chatworth ©Visit England/Rich J Jones

Understanding Brown's landscapes

The illustration overleaf shows some of the key features of a Brown landscape. Brown wrote very little about his work, much of his advice was never written down and his plans have not always survived. So what we know about Brown's work has been pieced together from looking at the landscapes, letters and diaries, old maps, archives at the estates where he worked, Brown's one surviving account book and his bank records at Drummonds.

The Capability Brown website includes summaries of what we know about his work at each site, as well as information on books and websites about Brown's work.

A costly business

Having your park landscaped by Brown was an expensive business. Brown's landscapes cost the equivalent of millions of pounds today. The calculator on www.measuringworth.com shows the cost of labour then and now and has been used to work out the modern values given on www.capabilitybrown.org.

Brown and biodiversity

By designing grassland and parkland trees, woodland and water parkland features, Brown created a mosaic of habitats, concentrated in one place, that provide plenty of homes for wildlife, some of them very rare. Today Brown's landscapes offer important refuges for wildlife and stepping stones for species to migrate between habitats in the more intensively farmed or developed landscape that often surrounds them.

The most important are the hundreds of existing trees he incorporated or new trees he planted which are now 300 to 1000 years old. They are important features as trees of great age, and for their open-grown character with huge trunks and spreading branches. The decaying wood and nooks and crannies are habitats for lichens, fungi and invertebrates such as beetles, as well as roosts for bats and birds.

Capability Brown dates in context

- 1707 The Act of Union between Scotland and England
- 1716 Capability Brown born in Kirkhale
- 1727 George II becomes king
- 1739 Brown moves away from Northumberland, probably to Lincolnshire
- 1741 Brown is employed by Lord Cobham at Stowe
- 1744 Marries Bridget Waye
- 1746 Their first child, Bridget, is born
- 1748 Lance, their eldest son, christened in January
- 1750 Brown commissioned by the 6th Earl of Coventry to redesign house and park at Croome
- 1751 Leaves Stowe and sets up his own business
- 1754 Consulted by 9th Earl of Essex on altering the house and grounds at Burghley
- 1760 Brown working for the Duke of Northumberland at Syon and Alnwick
- 1760 George III takes the throne
- 1761 Politician Horace Walpole notes that Brown is working at Chatsworth
- 1764 Brown appointed Royal Gardener, working at Richmond and Hampton Court
- 1764 Starts re-landscaping 2000 acres of parkland at Blenheim Palace
- 1767 Buys the manor of Fenstanton
- 1775 The American War of Independence begins
- 1783 Capability Brown dies and is buried in Fenstanton parish church
- 1789 French citizens storm the Bastille in Paris

Reading a Capability Brown Landscape



- **Park** The landscape style replaced enclosed formal gardens with sweeps of grass and water going right up to the house.
- **Drives** Brown designed long, curving drives so that visitors had impressive views of the estate as they approached the house.
- **House** The mansion was the focus for views to and from the park and was sometimes restyled to match the new landscape.
- **Lake** Water was used to enliven the middle of the landscape picture. Brown often hid the ends of a lake so it looked like a wide river.
- **Ha-ha** A deep ditch below the level of the grass, giving an uninterrupted view of the park. Animals could be seen grazing but could not stray onto the lawn.
- **Trees** Single trees and clumps of native varieties, such as oak, beech and sweet chestnut, were planted to break up the expanse of grass and frame views.
- **Cedar of Lebanon** Brown also used newly imported exotics, like the Cedar of Lebanon, which became known as his signature tree.
- **Woodland** was planted in a belt around the estate boundary, to hide service buildings, for timber or to create **pleasure grounds** with attractive rides or gravel walks.
- **Eye-catchers** Garden buildings, fine single trees and features outside the estate, such as a church spire, were used to draw the eye to the longer view.
- **Parkland features** such as a **boat-house**, or **ice house** were both decorative and useful while a **rotunda**, **temple** or menagerie gave a place to stop in the park.

Map from *Capability Brown* (2016) by Sarah Rutherford. Reproduced with the kind permission of National Trust Books, part of Pavilion Books Group Limited.