

CHAPTER 3

John Spyers – Lancelot Brown’s Surveyor at Hampton Court

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The discovery and subsequent exhibition of 150 drawings relating to Lancelot Brown’s tenure as Chief Gardener to King George III at Hampton Court, as well as new research into Brown’s practice, has greatly enhanced our knowledge about his impact and working methods. Nevertheless, it has also left the lives of Brown’s two right-hand men, John Spyers and Samuel Lapidge, largely obscured by their master’s long shadow.² When John Spyers came to write his will in 1770, he referred to himself as ‘Surveyor of Hampton Court’.³ This and a handful of references in correspondence and accounts for Brown’s landscape commissions provide the scant evidence of Spyers’s key position in Brown’s office. Spyers’s biography remains so partial that he would almost certainly be forgotten were it not for his extraordinary albums, one of 100 views of Hampton Court and another of fifty other drawings, created in and around 1778, and their unlikely purchase six years later by the empress Catherine the Great, and now held by the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg.⁴ Spyers appears to have lacked the business acumen of Brown, or even his office colleague Lapidge, and did not leave a detailed record. Thus it is not possible to form a clear picture of his career, but it is possible to create a biographical sketch of his life, which neatly divides up his known career into four parts. Firstly, his early years working in the family nursery business, when he learned his profession as a surveyor; then his time working as surveyor

¹ I would like to thank Dr David Jacques, who originally researched much of the new information used in this chapter for Historic Royal Palaces, in preparation for the exhibition of John Spyers’s drawings, *The Empress and the Gardener*, at Hampton Court in 2016 and made several helpful comments. My colleague Tom Drysdale also made helpful suggestions regarding the attribution of further Spyers images.

² Gregory, J., Spooner, S. & Williamson, T. (2013). *Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown: A research impact review* (Research Report 50) (pp. 7–9). London: English Heritage; *The Empress and the Gardener* Exhibition was held by Historic Royal Palaces at Hampton Court Palace, 27 April to 4 September 2016. A catalogue of Spyers’s drawings made at Hampton court was published on behalf of the State Hermitage Museum by the Hermitage Foundation UK: Dedinkin M. & Jacques, D. (2016). *The Hampton Court albums of Catherine the Great*. London: Fontanka; For Lapidge, see Woudstra in this volume.

³ The National Archives (TNA) PROB/11/1318/201, proved 24 January 1799.

⁴ The Hampton Court albums of John Spyers are in the Drawings collection in the Department of Western Art, the State Hermitage Museum; catalogue numbers OR 7585–7684 and OR 7685–7733. All are reproduced in Dedinkin and Jacques, *Hampton Court albums*.

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in Brown's office; his years under Brown, when he created his unique topographical record of Hampton Court; and finally his evolution in later life from surveyor into what could be characterised as a 'gentleman artist', and a man of not inconsiderable means.

Brown's and Spyers's careers were defined by the cultural and social worlds of late eighteenth-century Britain, and also by royal patronage from the young King George III (r. 1760–1820). The king's personal interests were famously varied, but he was essentially very conservative in his tastes and cautious – though never mean – in spending the Civil List, his allocation of public funds. From the start he patronised young architects such as Robert Adam and William Chambers, the artist Thomas Gainsborough and the composer Johann Christian Bach. Though fierce rivals, Brown and Chambers were both involved in schemes to create modern palaces and gardens in London and at Richmond, but neither scheme resulted in the creation of a wholly new palace. Instead, as mental illness began to dog his life and thwart his dreams, George III turned his attention to his ancient royal homes, most especially Windsor Castle but also Hampton Court. He had rejected the latter as a home but continued to maintain and keep it ready for royal occupation, such as when the Dutch Stadholder, William V of Orange, lived in exile at Hampton Court between 1795 and 1802.⁵

Whilst encouraging some of the great minds of the Enlightenment, especially through the new learned societies and academies, George III ended his days leaving a pasteboard gothic palace as an abandoned project at Kew, rather than the classical idyll that Brown and Chambers had been working on and envisaging in Richmond Gardens. Spyers's world, spent working on Brown's contracts, was equally rooted in England's past. Yet, as he turned towards art to make a living, he looked for business from a new, more mobile and moneyed class. As someone who aspired to better himself just like his master, Spyers appears to have ended his days very comfortably off.

Spyers's family origins, like several of Brown's key associates, were in the burgeoning nursery and market garden businesses to the west of London. As the topographical writer Daniel Lysons enthused, 'Mr. Nettleship of Twickenham [a kinsman who took over the Spyers's business] has sixteen acres. He cultivates about fifty acres for fruit of various sorts, in that Parish and Isleworth.'⁶ The Spyers family (sometimes spelled 'Spiers') were nurserymen in Twickenham from the early-eighteenth century, when John Spyers's father, Christopher, appears in local church records as a rate payer for 'Coles Land' in 1729.⁷ John was born around 1731, the second child of his father's second marriage. Christopher Spyers already had royal connections, supplying Frederick, Prince of Wales, for his garden at Carlton House, St. James's, in 1734.⁸ After his death in 1737, the business passed to his brothers Joshua (d. 1768) and Thomas (d. 1772), who continued to prosper from the trade.⁹ John, as a junior member of the business, appears to have trained as a surveyor and draughtsman, as was usual at the time. There were other notable nurseries competing for business from the manors and villas along the Thames: the Greenings at Brentford (see Chapter 9), William Cox, father and son of Kew, who had a stock of 30,000 plants in 1730, George Masters at Strand on the Green, and the Mason family at Isleworth, with 115,000 plants in stock at that time.¹⁰

Another mention of the Spyers name in connection with a notable estate was when Joshua's nursery provided Horace Walpole with trees for his newly established garden at Strawberry Hill (Figure 3.1). In August 1748 Walpole claimed that 'My present and sole occupation is planting, in which I have made great progress, and talked very learnedly with the nurserymen, except that now and then a lettuce run to seed overturns all my botany, as I have more than once taken it for a curious West Indian flowering shrub'. At this early date Walpole's garden occupied only a few acres, and other nurseries also supplied him, so the auspices of having

⁵ Thurley, S. (2003). *Hampton Court, a social and architectural history* (p. 337). New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

⁶ Lysons, D. (1796). Market gardens in London. In *The environs of London* (Volume 4, Counties of Herts, Essex and Kent) (pp. 573–576). London.

⁷ Church rates information on the Spyers family published on the Twickenham Museum website: <http://www.twickenham-museum.org.uk>, accessed 13 September 2016. According to Samuel Lewis, *A plan of Twickenham...*, published in 1784 (reprinted as the frontispiece to Edward Ironsides, *The history and antiquities of Twickenham*), Cole had a house just north of the Spyers home, along the London Road, and the later Spyers–Nettleship nursery occupied land east of this residence, on the road to Richmond.

⁸ Coombs, D. (1997). The garden at Carlton House of Frederick Prince of Wales and Augusta Princess Dowager of Wales. *Garden History*, 25(2), 173.

⁹ London Metropolitan Archives. Copyhold transactions in the Syon Manor Court Books, ACC 1379/40–61.

¹⁰ Urwin, A. C. B. (1982). *Commercial nurseries and market gardens* (pp. 2–3). Twickenham: London Borough of Twickenham Local History Society.



Approach to Strawberry-Hill.

T.K.

Figure 3.1: *Approach to Strawberry Hill*, John Spyers (attributed), after 1792. From Horace Walpole's extra-illustrated copy of *A Description of the Villa of Mr. Horace Walpole*, 1784. Courtesy of The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

such a client may yet to have been apparent. More significantly, in 1747 a 'Mr. Spyers' was paid £2-2-0d for a survey and plan of Walpole's small estate.¹¹ This might have involved the young John, then about nineteen years old, assisting in his uncle's nursery as a surveyor. The trail then goes cold but, judging from later events, John is likely to have honed his skills and built up a local reputation as a surveyor and draughtsman for customers of the Spyers nursery.

Brown's practice began to flourish from the early 1750s, and he soon needed assistants, one of which was Robert Robinson. He, however, had moved to Scotland by 1760, and so Brown recruited new members to his practice and the first reference to Spyers working for him comes in 1761, on the 7th Earl of Northampton's estate at Castle Ashby. Brown was paid £50 for 'a great General Plan', that is, a design in preparation, plus works, in 1763.¹² For more than twenty years until Brown's death, it is known that Spyers worked on at least thirty houses and estates, mostly documented in Brown's private account book, bank records, and occasional mentions in correspondence from the clients. However, it is likely that Spyers worked on many further

¹¹ Katz, S. R. (2008). Horace Walpole's landscape at Strawberry Hill. *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes*, 28(1), 16.

¹² Stroud, D. (1975). *Capability Brown* (p. 107).



Figure 3.2: *Blenheim Park*, John Spyers (attributed), c. 1763. View across the lake to Woodstock with proposals for a new park wall. © Courtesy of Blenheim Palace.

jobs as Brown's surveyor and draughtsman.¹³ During their first decade together there is direct evidence for just five jobs involving Spyers, but in 1764 they worked together on one of the most significant commissions, Blenheim, where he drew up a presentation survey of the existing estate.¹⁴ Though not always an essential tool of Brown's working practice, particularly if an estate survey already existed, carefully prepared new surveys would have been an important part of the contract of work. The job at Blenheim resulted in what may well be the earliest and certainly the largest topographical drawing by Spyers. The plan that Brown and his assistants then prepared was an impressive souvenir with which Brown and his client could expound on his new landscape to friends and neighbours.

A panoramic view of the village of Woodstock from the park at Blenheim shows an unrealised proposal to build a new gothic boundary wall abutting the town (Figure 3.2).¹⁵ It has been suggested that the drawing is by Brown with assistance from Spyers in recording the architecture, but it is quite probable that the draughtsmanship is entirely by Spyers, guided by Brown's invention. The penmanship of the drawing is consistent throughout and compares closely with Spyers's known topographical drawings. Such a large drawing – it is around 1.5 m long – would have required a great deal of painstaking work and is more likely to be the work of an assistant, given Brown's rapacious output at this time and his own limited ability as a draughtsman. It was normal practice for an architect, and indeed a garden designer, to take credit for and even sign the works made in his office, making it difficult to distinguish between the work of Brown and that of his many assistants.

Shortly afterwards Brown was appointed to the prestigious and remunerative post of gardener to the king at Hampton Court. He was also asked by the king to design alterations to Richmond Gardens, intended as the setting for the new palace on which Chambers was working. Brown had already been working since 1757 at Syon Park across the river.¹⁶ Both Brown and Spyers moved with their families to Hampton Court, for what

¹³ e.g. Phibbs, J. (2013). A list of landscapes that have been attributed to Lancelot 'Capability' Brown. *Garden History*, *XLI*(2), 244–277; Gregory, J., Spooner, S., & Williamson, T. (2013). *Lancelot Brown: A research impact review*.

¹⁴ Brown, J. (2011). *The omnipotent magician, Lancelot 'Capability' Brown 1716–1783* (p. 146, n 3). London: Chatto and Windus. The 1763 estate survey drawn by Spyers is in the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal: catalogue number DR 1985:0416.

¹⁵ Sold at Bonhams, London, Old Master Paintings, 1 July 2015 (lot 5); online catalogue <https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/22644/lot/5>, accessed 27 September 2016.

¹⁶ Sumner, C. (2016). A river runs through: Lancelot 'Capability' Brown at Syon and Kew. *London Landscapes – Newsletter of London's Parks and Gardens [Trust]*, *42*(Spring 2016), 18–23; Meader, J. (1779). *The planter's guide; or, pleasure-gardener's companion, [etc.]*. London. This is dedicated to the Duke of Northumberland and credits Meader as the duke's gardener. However, to date no references to his work at Syon have been discovered in the Duke of Northumberland's archives at Alnwick.

may have been Brown’s busiest period. Brown’s post included the use of the large Head Gardener’s residence, Wilderness House, and Spyers was granted a palace apartment (Figure 3.3). Spyers is mentioned on various occasions as living somewhere at Hampton Court, and his obituary in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* mentions his death in an apartment there in 1798, although no lodging list for the palace has survived to confirm its whereabouts.¹⁷ This move would have brought Spyers into daily contact with the palace and its household, which he would subsequently record in numerous drawings.

Remarkably little is known about Spyers’s practice working with Brown. That Wilderness House itself was not used for Brown’s busy office appears to be evidenced by the substantial works he requested not long after becoming gardener, when in 1769 he had a large additional room built, complaining that:

The Offices are very bad, the Kitchen very offensive and the rooms very small & uncomfortable to one who at times am afflicted with an Asthma. I care not how plain, nor how common it is done, provided I can get the space to breathe in.¹⁸

The new building was intended as a kitchen with a twenty-five-foot room over it – perhaps planned as a new office – but he subsequently changed his mind and specified a dining room and cellar, converting his brew house to provide a new kitchen instead. Brown’s place of work may have been in one of the Office of Works houses on Hampton Court Green – probably the building known as ‘The Paper House’, next to the former home of Sir Christopher Wren, architect and royal surveyor – which he had been allotted and might have served as a garden office.¹⁹ On the other hand, Brown let all or some part of this house, so the question of his workplace is unresolved.

Spyers, it seems, may have worked as an associate, rather than as an employee. Examination of Brown’s bank account at Drummonds revealed regular payments to Spyers, which are likely to include money for disbursements, but, unlike Samuel Lapidge, he does not appear to have been entrusted with a managerial role, such as paying the foremen.²⁰ In fact, Lapidge, who was responsible for finances within the practice, paid large sums to John Spyers and his wife Elizabeth.²¹

The 1770s saw Brown working with Spyers across England including major contracts at Sheffield Place (Sussex), Longford Castle (Wilts), and his unfulfilled project for Belvoir Castle (Rutland), which are recorded with eighteen other commissions in Brown’s personal account book, along with several others mentioned in other clients’ papers.²² Brown aspired to the life of a gentleman and by the 1770s; reaping the rewards of his appointment and commissions, he could afford to separate his domestic and business accommodation at Hampton Court, and acquired the small manor of Fenstanton in Huntingdonshire. Naturally, it was Spyers who surveyed his master’s new estate in 1777 and elegantly inscribed it with a sophisticated Arcadian vignette, revealing some artistic ability – a skill which Brown only occasionally employed.²³ Spyers himself had inherited a house together with land from his uncle Joshua a few years before, which he entailed to his wife Elizabeth and five children in his will, made in 1771.²⁴ The house was situated in the middle of nearby Twickenham and was a substantial detached dwelling (now known as Grosvenor House), of a comparable size to Wilderness House. Brown and Spyers continued to collaborate on several commissions, but they had begun to tail off in both scale and number from the early 1770s. This probably meant less work for Spyers, and this, as well as his improved circumstances, perhaps influenced the next direction in his career. It seems likely that Spyers now began his series of topographical drawings of Hampton Court and its environs as a personal project of self-improvement.

¹⁷ *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, 84, 1155. Obituary, 31 December 1798.

¹⁸ TNA, Work 6/18, 8 March 1769.

¹⁹ TNA, Work 4/15, 2 & 16 June 1769, 14 July 1769, 1 September 1769, 27 October 1769, 19 January 1770. Work 6/18, 8 March 1769, 1 September 1769.

²⁰ Brown, D. (2016). People, places and payments. *Occasional Papers from the RHS Lindley Library* 14, 12.

²¹ Royal Bank of Scotland Archive: Drummonds Bank Private Account Ledgers, DR/427/98. I am grateful to David Brown for supplying this reference.

²² Lindley Library: Royal Horticultural Society, London: Lancelot Brown Account Book, 1759–83 [MS 998 BRO BRO]. Available online at <https://www.rhs.org.uk/education-learning/libraries-at-rhs/collections/library-online/capability-brown-account-book>, accessed 27 September 2016; Historic Royal Palaces archive: Jacques, D. Report on John Spyers’ Watercolours, unpublished.

²³ Stroud, D. (1975). *Capability Brown* (p. 109; fig. 18a).

²⁴ TNA, PROB/11/1318/201, proved 24 January 1799.



Figure 3.3: Wilderness House in *View of the 'Wilderness Garden', Hampton Court*, John Spyers. The building on the left is the new Dining Room added by Brown. Source: The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. Photograph © The State Hermitage Museum/photo by Pavel Demidov. Reproduced with permission.

Four of the Hampton Court watercolours are dated 1778, though – to judge by the range of competence and technique shown in the drawings – he may actually have produced them over a period of several years. He was not a naturally gifted artist and his disconcertingly elongated figures probably betray his lack of formal artistic training. It has been suggested that in mid-career the most likely place for his professional training as a draughtsman was close to home, probably under the tutelage of his older brother-in-law, Jacob Bonneau (1717–86), who was an artist and drawing master.²⁵ Bonneau was a versatile engraver who had worked with other surveyors such as John Rocque, and he had even exhibited his own landscape drawings, including at the newly founded Royal Academy. He may also have been employed as drawing master in the household of dowager Princess of Wales, the future king's mother, for his exhibits included views of her home at Cliveden (Berkshire) and nearby Hedsor, a former residence which was bought by her Lord Chamberlain, Lord Boston.²⁶

The evidence of the Hampton Court album, with its 100 views, suggests that Spyers had an intimate knowledge of the gardens, although he did not stray into the kitchen garden, and that he knew the two adjoining parks, Hampton Court and Bushy Park, exceedingly well (Figures 3.4 and 3.5). Recent conservation work at the Hermitage Museum has revealed detailed preparatory sketches in pencil pasted beneath some of the finished drawings in the album, suggesting that Spyers drew them first in the field, then worked them up at home, later adding his figures and other human interest.²⁷ The album opens with over fifty views of the two parks, making this by far Spyers's most extensive study as an artist, and continues with twenty-four views of the formal gardens over which Brown presided; with these Spyers appears to have aimed to provide a detailed record, often from several viewpoints. Although not wholly artistically satisfying, the album can be regarded as an example of the contemporary conceit of making a visual journey through this landscape, which Brown and Spyers must have trod many times, creating an artistic visualisation of approaching a country house or palace on a carriage ride.

Of little interest to contemporaries, but of great value to historians today, are Spyers's several views of Brown's working areas, such as the dilapidated Melon Ground, where Brown demanded repairs to the frames and the pineapple-, strawberry-, and cherry-houses (Figure 3.6).²⁸

The inclusion of such prosaic views, of places rarely visited by their royal owners, would support the idea that the series was begun without any particular intention. Together, they are of considerable interest to scholars as a unique eighteenth-century record of the palace and its environs. The album also includes eighteen competent perspectives of the palace's architecture, rendered using pencil, ink, and watercolour. It has been suggested that he used a *camera obscura* to achieve such orthogonal accuracy in his architectural views, an idea supported by the fact that his views correspond extremely closely with early photographs of the palace, made using similar optics.²⁹ Whilst he expended much effort on several large, folio-sized watercolours of classic views of the palace, which were also drawn by far more talented artists of his day, he included the household offices and courtyards, which had not previously interested artists. These now provide a unique visual record of the spaces before they were heavily altered and restored in the Victorian period.

In this light, the views can also be regarded as an expression of Spyers's aspiration to be recognised as a landscape artist. In some of his simplest drawings, he employs hackneyed artistic conventions, such framing with drawn vignettes, or using a sepia-coloured wash, adding a sense of timelessness to the view. However, other drawings with trees and shrubs placed in the foreground are more sophisticated and confidently executed, showing much more flair. Presumably this improvement was due to the tutelage of Bonneau or others, and Brown himself may have encouraged Spyers in this direction through his contacts at the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts, and in a circle of collectors around Hampton Court.³⁰ Another successful aspect

²⁵ Jacques, D. Report on John Spyers' watercolours; Hounslow Library: Parish Registers, All Saints Isleworth. Spyers' marriage to Elizabeth Bonneau, 1754; Graves, A. (1905). *The Royal Academy of Arts: A complete dictionary of contributors and their work from its foundation in 1769 to 1904* (p. 237). London: H. Graves and Co. Ltd.

²⁶ Bonneau is mentioned as a 'tutor in drawing to some of the Royal Family' in an obituary to a family relation, in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, October 1831, p. 374.

²⁷ Dedinkin, M. & Jacques, D. (2016). *Hampton Court albums* (pp. 19–21).

²⁸ TNA, Work 4/14, 7 February 1772.

²⁹ I am grateful to Alden Gregory of Historic Royal Palaces for this observation, available online at Historic Royal Palaces Curators' blog: <http://blog.hrp.org.uk/curators/the-draughtsman-and-the-photographer-john-spyers-and-francis-frith-at-hampton-court-palace>, accessed 29 September 2016.

³⁰ Brown, J. (2011). *The Omnipotent Magician* (pp. 142–144, 156). London: Chatto and Windus.



Figure 3.4: *Diana Fountain, Bushy Park*, John Spyers. Source: The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. Photograph © The State Hermitage Museum/photo by Pavel Demidov. Reproduced with permission.



Figure 3.5: *View of the Pavillions, Hampton Court Park*, John Spyers, with an artist, possibly Spyers, at work. Source: The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. Photograph © The State Hermitage Museum/photo by Pavel Demidov. Reproduced with permission.



Figure 3.6: *The North West View of the Royal Palace at Hampton Court*, John Spyers. This view shows the working areas of the palace grounds, rarely depicted by other artists, where Brown complained of dilapidated frames and soft fruit houses. Source: The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. Photograph © The State Hermitage Museum/photo by Pavel Demidov. Reproduced with permission.

of these drawings is how Spyers displays his nurseryman's knowledge by adopting a clear, stylistic shorthand for drawing different species of trees, which makes them easy to distinguish.

After six years this album, together with another with fifty images on a variety of themes, was bought by Catherine the Great in 1783 for 1,000 roubles.³¹ The empress's Scottish gardener in St. Petersburg and former gardener at Syon, James Meader, had acted as intermediary.³² It is unclear what the empress thought she was buying; if she expected watercolours or designs of Brown landscapes she would have been disappointed, for Spyers's views were of the unimproved Hampton Court. Given their inconsistent quality and the extensive range of subjects it is probable that Spyers compiled the folios from a body of existing work created over a period of years, before seizing the opportunity to sell them around the time of Brown's death.

It seems likely that the albums were not specially commissioned but were bound together in preparation for sale, and this was especially so with the smaller album. It comprised a conveniently round number of fifty drawings including diverse material from the draughtsman's office, including rather naively drawn picturesque – in its original sense – landscapes after Italian and Dutch models, and romantic views of medieval ruins. These may have shared their inspiration with the new landscape style promoted by Brown, but they would have been singularly unimpressive amongst Catherine's superb collection of European drawings. This album also includes several poor copies of heads in red chalk, taken from a contemporary Italian publication after Raphael's designs.³³ These would have been standard practice for any student of art at the time, and they betray more Spyers's ambition as a fine artist than his ability as a draughtsman.

This second album does, however, provide valuable insight into the daily workings of Brown's drawing office, for which little detail has come to light. Most telling are five carefully rendered architectural drawings for garden buildings and bridges. These were probably rejected designs made for Brown's clients, and prepared by Spyers in the course of his work. The draughtsmanship in their landscape detail compares very closely with his views of Hampton Court, and there is little reason to doubt their authorship. A recent discovery of an exact copy of one of the designs for a neo-classical bridge further illuminates this aspect of Brown's practice.³⁴ The version found in an English collection is signed by Brown, and dated 1775, although it is clearly in the same hand as the Russian drawing. This carefully measured elevation, which sets the bridge over a typical Brown-style lake, edged with mixed trees, is accompanied by a previously unknown plan. When considered with their provenance, which links them to the Duke of Northumberland, this strongly suggests that it was an unexecuted scheme, perhaps for Brown's new lake at Syon Park, for which Robert Adam also submitted a design (Figure 3.7).

No evidence has yet come to light that Spyers ever received training as an architect, although Brown's account book confirms that he was entrusted with drafting records of buildings as well as landscapes.³⁵ It seems likely that these would have been presentation copies made after Brown's own invention or one of his associated architects. As unwanted designs it could have been easy enough for Spyers to scoop them up with his own drawings to impress the empress, especially after Brown's demise. As shown elsewhere in this volume, although Brown was a naturally talented designer, he came to rely on a network of established architects and 'pupils', such as Lapidge, who had received more formal training than either he or Spyers.³⁶ However, more detailed research and analysis is needed to unravel the authorship of Brown's office drawings as a corpus.

After Brown's death in 1783, Lapidge took over his outstanding landscape business, and Spyers's career as a surveyor seems to have come to an end. He reappears in a new life as what can be characterised as a 'gentleman artist'. With substantial property in Twickenham, some of which he may have let, and with the empress's money, he was probably free to do as he chose. The first inkling of his activities as an artist in his own right was his exhibition of a design for a grotto at the Royal Academy in 1780, following in the footsteps of his brother-in-law,

³¹ Cross, A. (2007). *By the banks of the Neva* (pp. 271, 282). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³² Dedinkin, M. & Jacques, D. (2016). *Hampton Court albums* (pp. 9–18).

³³ Fianza, Paolo after Raffaello Sanzio, 1757–66 *Teste Scelte di Personaggi Illustri in Lettere ...*, Rome. I am grateful to Martin Clayton, Royal Collection Trust, for helping identify the source of Spyers's copies.

³⁴ The drawings are in a private collection and originally belonged to the Rev. Thomas Percy, a relation of the first Duke of Northumberland, who employed Brown at Syon and Alnwick. Information kindly provided by Dr Susan Darling, London Parks and Garden Trust.

³⁵ Brown, D. (2016). People, places and payments (p. 12). David Brown cites Spyers taking 'General Plans of the Place & the front & Plans of the different Storys ...' at Cardiff Castle in 1777.

³⁶ See Chapter 7 in this volume: Woudstra, J. Lancelot Brown's legacy of landscape practice: Samuel Lapidge 'Who knows my accounts and the nature of them'.



Figure 3.7: *Design for a neo-classical bridge over a lake or river*, John Spyers (attributed). This may be a rejected design for a new bridge over Brown’s lake at Syon Park. Source: The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. Photograph © The State Hermitage Museum/photo by Pavel Demidov. Reproduced with permission.

Bonneau. Two further exhibits followed, all shown under the misnomer of ‘James Spyers, painter of Hampton Court.’³⁷ Why he should have adopted the name of his late uncle James is a mystery: perhaps a clerical error in the catalogues, or an attempt by John Spyers to conceal his former profession. From this period on Spyers drew a number of modest-sized views of villas and houses in the local environs of Twickenham, Richmond, and Isleworth, which were issued as aquatints by two prolific printmakers, Francis Jukes, and J(ohn) Wells.

These views, such as that of Sir Edward Walpole’s House at Isleworth (Figure 3.8), follow the conventional formula of Spyers’s Hampton Court drawings. He appears to have found a niche in an increasingly crowded market of topographical printmakers, which appealed to the local gentry and city men who flocked to build and create gardens along the banks of the Thames. Spyers was following the fashion set by better-known publishers such as R. and J. Dodsley, who had published the earliest books of suburban views made by Samuel Wale in 1761, but he also seized the commercial potential of the newly invented technique of aquatint, which his printmaker Jukes had improved upon whilst working for a far greater topographical artist, Paul Sandby.³⁸ In 1786 Spyers and Jukes published six architectural views of Hampton Court, an enterprise which may have been planned at the time of the sale of his drawings.³⁹ He was never again to make prints of such a well-known, and potentially profitable subject. However, he did go on to publish at least sixteen local views between 1784 and 1796, some of which were later republished in Daniel Lyson’s *Environs of London* (1795) and elsewhere.⁴⁰ The majority of these were printed by Jukes, about the same time as the Hampton Court set in the mid-1780s,

³⁷ Graves, A. (1905). *Royal Academy* (Vol. VII, p. 255).

³⁸ Clayton, T. (1991). *The English print 1688–1802* (pp. 176, 214). London and New Haven: Yale University Press; Bonehill, J. & Skinner, S. (2009). Grand secrets: Sandby’s materials and techniques. In J. Bonehill & S. Daniels (Eds.), *Paul Sandby: Picturing Britain* (pp. 65–71). London: Royal Academy of Arts.

³⁹ Dedinkin, M. & Jacques, D. (2016) *Hampton Court albums* (p. 11).

⁴⁰ Lysons, D. (1792). *The environs of London [etc]*. London: Strahan, for T. Cadell.



Figure 3.8: *A View of Sir Edward Walpole's House at Isleworth*, drawn by John Spyers, aquatint etching by J. Wells, 1784. This was the home of Horace Walpole's wayward brother, who died the year it was made. © British Library. Public Domain.

when they must have held out hope of some commercial success. Besides these published prints, a further thirty or so watercolours and ink drawings survive which are signed or can be reasonably attributed to Spyers, because of his distinctive style and choice of subject. None of these are preparatory drawings for known aquatints, suggesting that either the designs for his published prints were kept together and later lost or they remain to be discovered. These individual drawings are more diverse in subject and design than the aquatints of local houses, and they include two views made at Strawberry Hill, the Royal Observatory at Richmond (Figure 3.10), and a scattering of more distant places including a waterfall at Stourhead.⁴¹ Spyers rarely signed his drawings, and it is quite possible that there are more to be identified.

One of the largest collections of Spyers's later work, amounting to about thirteen attributed drawings and aquatints, is to be found in George III's topographical collection, and came from the vast gathering of books and images assembled by the royal librarian Sir Frederick Barnard, now in the British Library. It includes an unusual view of the pond on the common at Twickenham, close to Spyers's family home (Figure 3.9). Whilst Spyers's prints and drawings of mostly minor houses and places may never have caught the king's attention amid such a large and distinguished library, they are a reminder of both Spyers's ambitions and his professional proximity to the king through his employment by Brown. No doubt this would have afforded him access to draw in what were still largely private parks.

⁴¹ Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University Drawings, *Chapel in the wood* 49.3678 and *Approach to Strawberry Hill* 49.3582. Available at <http://images.library.yale.edu/walpoleweb/default.asp>, accessed 29 September 2016; British Museum Drawing, *Waterfall at Stourhead* 1960,0716.20, misattributed to James Spyers, available at http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=746850&partId=1&searchText=stourhead+waterfall&page=1, accessed 29 September 2016. British Library, King's Topographical Collection Drawing, *Richmond Observatory Maps K.Top.41.16.r*, available at <http://george3.splrarebooks.com/collection/view/The-Royal-Observatory-in-Richmond-Garden>, accessed 29 September 2016.



Figure 3.9: [Twickenham Common], John Spyers (attributed), 1780–95? Copyright The British Library Board; Maps K.Top.124 Supp.fol.39. Reproduced with permission.



Figure 3.10: *The Royal Observatory in Richmond Gardens*, John Spyers (attributed), 1778–90? © British Library. Public Domain.



J. Spyers Del.

VIEW OF THE PORTICO FRONT OF BRICKLEY LODGE, IN NEEDWOOD FOREST.

10.

Figure 3.11: *Byrkley Lodge* in Needwood Forest, Staffordshire, John Spyers, 1786. View of the Portico Front. Copyright William Salt Library. Reproduced with permission.

These royal drawings include one intriguing postscript to Spyers's life as both surveyor and artist: a group of four views of Byrkley (or 'Brickley') Lodge, a hunting park in Staffordshire (Figure 3.11), which was owned by one of Brown's clients, the Earl of Donegall, as well as another of his nearby properties, Hopwas Hayes. Lord Donegall's house was Fisherwick Hall, which Brown had rebuilt and landscaped from 1768.⁴² These Byrkley and Hopwas drawings exist in another set, dated 1786, held by the William Salt Library, Stafford, together with six drawings by Spyers of Fisherwick itself. The William Salt Library versions are almost identical to the group in the King's Library, right down to their inscriptions and early numbering. Although there is no obvious reason for the duplicate set, it must surely indicate a lasting relationship between Spyers and Lord Donegall: perhaps even the possibility that Spyers did occasionally continue to work as a surveyor in his own right, to justify the return journey to Staffordshire long after working there with Brown.

Spyers still remains perhaps the most shadowy figure in Brown's circle, but he is beginning to be revealed through the rediscovery of his albums of drawings in the Hermitage Museum, the identification here of a larger body of his work as an independent artist, and the proliferation of new research into the men and women behind Brown. Given his long association with Brown, Spyers must have had a hand in many more estate surveys and general plans than have been recorded so far, and more evidence may emerge. Like his younger colleague, Lapidge, some of their master's ambition for self-advancement seems to have rubbed off on Spyers. In his own modest way Spyers is a good example of a minor figure of the Georgian Enlightenment, eager to improve himself and able to accomplish diverse skills to take advantage of the opportunities of the age.

Select Bibliography

A select bibliography is available at the end of this volume, or at: <https://doi.org/10.22599/CapabilityBrown.o>.

⁴² British Library, King's Topographical Collection Drawings, K.Top.38.49.a-d; 38.53, available at <http://george3.splrarebooks.com/collection/search/search&XID=a853e9358431bf6628dc9228715961d27c56d00a&keywords=brickley>, accessed 29 September 2016 and William Salt Library, Staffordshire County Council Drawings SV-IV.197 to 202; and SV-IV.86 to 89; and SV_IV.346, available at <http://www.search.staffspasttrack.org.uk/Search.aspx?PageIndex=1&SortOrder=2&KeyWord=spyers> and <http://www.search.staffspasttrack.org.uk/Details.aspx?ResourceID=9384&PageIndex=1&KeyWord=brickley&SortOrder=2>, accessed 29 September 2016.