

CHAPTER 5

The Brown Business

Tom Williamson¹

Lancelot Brown is popularly viewed as an innovative genius who invented a new kind of ‘naturalistic’ setting for the residences of the rich. He swept away gardens enclosed by walls and hedges, avenues, and all forms of geometric planting, and in their place he created ‘landscape parks’, comprising wide prospects of turf, irregularly scattered with trees and clumps of woodland, and surrounded in whole or part by a perimeter woodland belt. The boundary between the mown lawns around the house, and this wider parkland landscape, was dissolved by the use of the sunken fence or ha-ha and, wherever topography and money permitted, a lake of serpentine or irregular form would be placed in the middle distance of the view from the windows.² As most readers will be well aware, of course, we must be careful not to exaggerate the extent to which all this was new. Purely geometric styles of garden design had, in fact, been in retreat for many decades before Brown began his career as an independent designer in 1749.³ Through the 1720s Charles Bridgeman and others had created simplified geometric landscapes which already, at some places, included lakes of irregular form. In the 1730s William Kent designed serpentine gardens as distinct spaces within such simplified formal frameworks, ornamented with classical buildings and scattered clumps, at Holkham, Stowe, and elsewhere.⁴ During the 1740s and 1750s these gardens in turn became progressively more cluttered, both with elaborate and often exotic planting, and with a whole host of weird and wonderful structures – Chinese temples, gothic ruins, mosques, Turkish tents – to create what some historians refer to as the ‘rococo garden’.⁵ As early as 1739, the year that Brown moved south from Northumberland, one contributor to *The World* lampooned the contemporary obsession with ‘moving earth’, and the way that ‘a Serpentine River and a Wood are become the absolute Necessities of Life, without which a gentleman of the smallest fortune thinks he makes no Figure in the country’.⁶

¹ Although written by the author, this chapter draws heavily on the innovative and important research of David Brown.

² Stroud, D. (1950). *Capability Brown*; Hyams, E. (1971). *Capability Brown and Humphry Repton*. London: Dent; Hinde, T. (1986) *Capability Brown: The story of a master gardener*. London: Norton and Co; Brown, J. (2011). *The omnipotent magician, Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown*. London: Chatto and Windus; Mayer, L. (2011). *Capability Brown and the English landscape garden*. Princes Risborough: Shire; Shields, S. (2016). *Moving Heaven and Earth: Capability Brown’s gift of landscape*. London: Unicorn Publishing.

³ Jacques, D. (1983). *Georgian gardens: The reign of nature*. London: Batsford.

⁴ Hunt, J. D. (1987). *William Kent, landscape garden designer: An assessment and catalogue of his designs*. London: Zwemmer.

⁵ Mowl, T. (1999). *An insular rococo: Architecture, politics and society in Ireland and England, 1710–70*. London: Reaktion; Symes, M. (2012). *The picturesque and the later Georgian garden*. Bristol: Redcliffe Press.

⁶ Richardson, T. (2007). *The Arcadian friends: Inventing the English landscape garden* (p. 125). London: Bantam.

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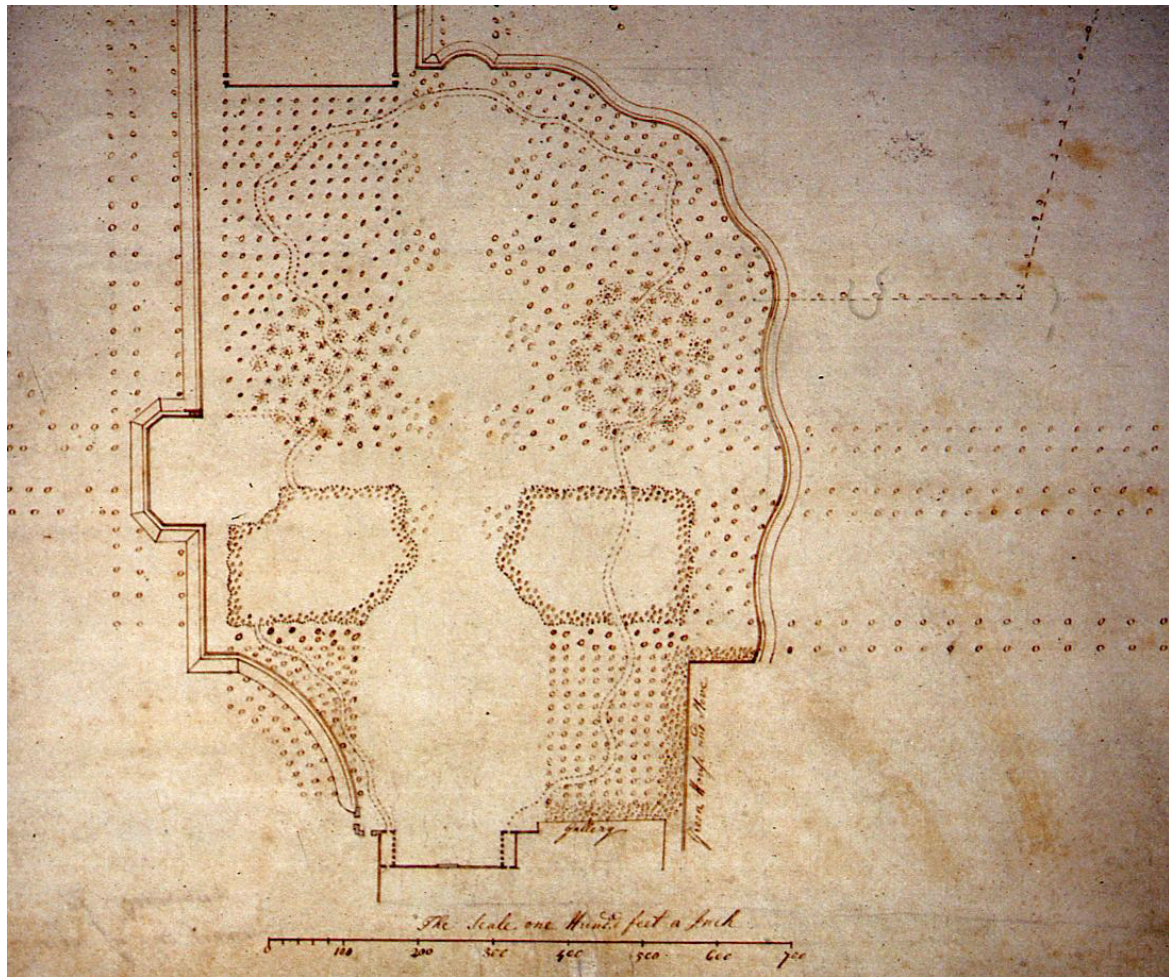


Figure 5.1: *Design for the pleasure ground at Badminton, Gloucestershire, Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown, c. 1752.* This differs little from other contemporary gardens laid out in a broadly rococo style. Note, in particular, the rather stiff sinuosity of the ha-ha, and the survival of regular geometric planting in the wider landscape. Copyright David Brown, CC BY-NC 4.0.

Serpentine landscaping was not new when Brown began to practise; the application of this aesthetic to the entire landscape around the house was novel, as was the complete rejection of all geometry. Yet Brown’s style did not appear suddenly, or fully formed. His early works, at places like Badminton in Gloucestershire (1752) or Ingestre in Staffordshire (1756), differed little if at all from other gardens laid out at the time in a broadly rococo style (Figure 5.1). They displayed a rather mannered irregularity and continued to co-exist with geometric features. Indeed, most of his energies were directed towards gardens and pleasure grounds in the immediate vicinity of the house, rather than at the wider landscape. At Moor Park in Hertfordshire, for example, where he worked in the mid-1750s, he extensively modified Bridgeman’s monumental landscape to create an extensive, ‘naturalistic’ pleasure ground to the east of the mansion. Yet he did little if anything in the wider parkland, which continued to be filled with a dense mesh of avenues.⁷ Brown’s style was developing rapidly by this time, however, and by the end of the decade one of its key features was firmly in place: the recurrent, almost formulaic arrangement of a mansion looking down across a smooth slope of turf to a serpentine area of water (Figure 5.2). Brown was now designing on a grander scale, moreover, paying particular attention to drives and approaches. Avenues and other geometric features were ruthlessly removed, unless his clients

⁷ MacNair, A. D. M., Rowe, A. & Williamson, T. (2015). *Dury and Andrews’ map of Hertfordshire: Society and landscape in the eighteenth century* (pp. 181–182). Hatfield: Hertfordshire University Press.



Figure 5.2: *Kimberley Hall, Norfolk*, showing Brown's classic design feature of an expanse of smooth turf extending uninterrupted from house to water. Photo copyright Tom Williamson, CC BY-NC 4.0.

insisted on their retention, and the number of ornamental buildings was reduced. By the early 1760s all the elements of his style were firmly in place. Natural landforms – their outlines suitably smoothed by excavation and earth movement – were the key feature, their shape and disposition accentuated by planting and by the use of water:⁸ one of the purposes of Brown's lakes was, arguably, to emphasise the shape of the land, the subtlety and complexity of the contours, and contemporary illustrations make it clear that the sides of his water bodies were kept scrupulously clear of marginal vegetation. His landscapes were essays in serpentine simplicity, almost minimalist in conception.

Of particular significance were the numerous carefully tended grass rides, and gravelled drives, which threaded through the parkland, often running in and out of the perimeter belts (Figure 5.3). Earlier styles of 'naturalistic' garden had privileged particular views and prospects, and they had employed features and buildings to convey messages, ideas, and emotions. In Brown's designs the landscape itself – the massing of trees, the disposition of water and the shapes of landforms – was the message, and, while they often included important viewpoints, they were mainly intended to be experienced on the move, along the rides and drives, on horseback or in a carriage, and thus as a continuum. Thomas Whately's description, written in the late 1760s, of the approach to Caversham in Berkshire, laid out by Brown a few years before, captures this concept well. It continues for nearly 1,000 words and has an almost filmic quality:

⁸ Williams, R. (1983). Making places: Garden-mastery and English Brown. *Journal of Garden History*, 3, 382–385.

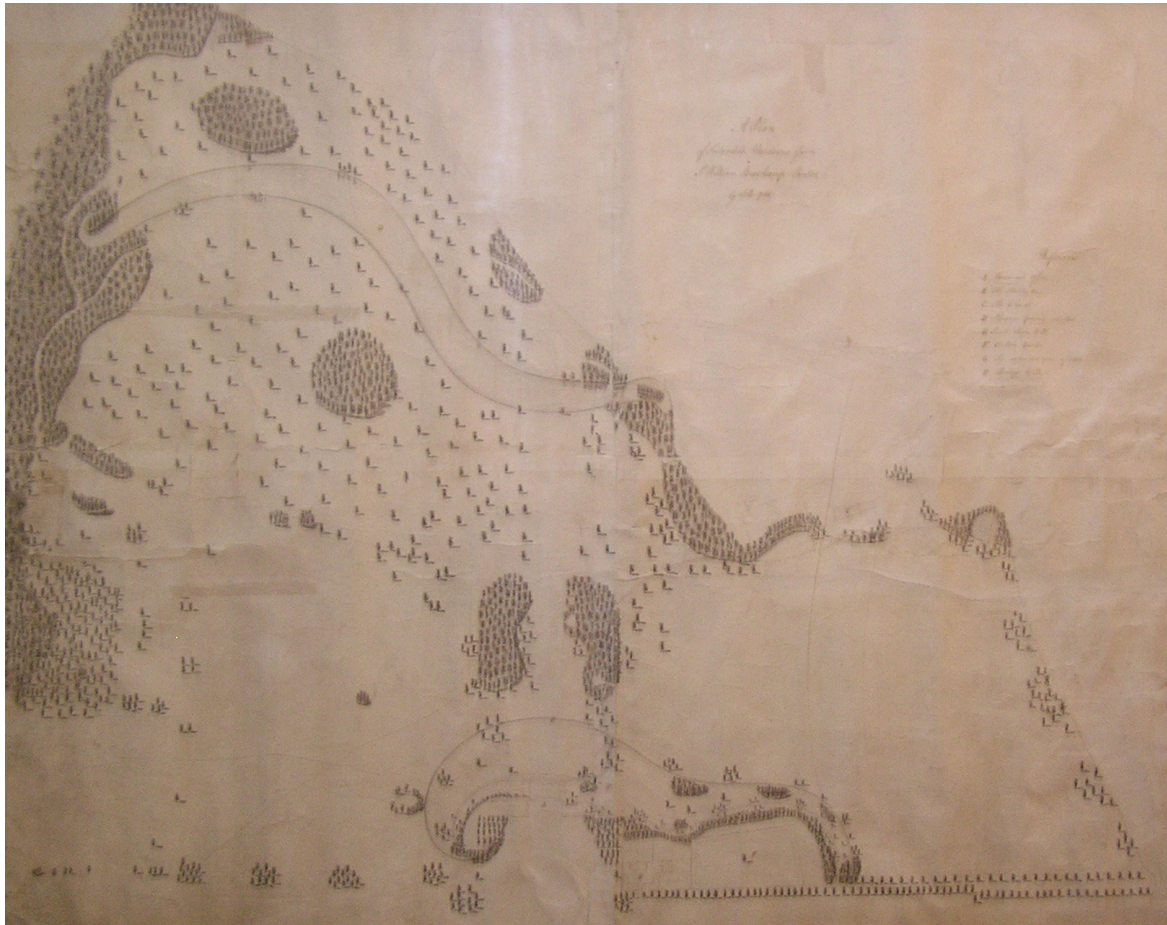


Figure 5.3: *A Plan for Langley Park, Norfolk*, Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, 1765. Brown fashioned clumps, rides, and walks through the remnants of an ancient wood in the north-western section of the park. Photo copyright Tom Williamson, CC BY-NC 4.0.

... the road passes between the groups [of trees], under a light and lofty arch of ash; and then opens upon a glade, broken on the left only by a single tree; and on the right by several beeches standing so close together as to be but one in appearance; this glade is bounded by a beautiful grove, which in one part spreads a perfect gloom, but in others divides into different clusters, which leave openings for the gleams of light to pour in ...⁹

There were obvious connections between the way that the landscape was experienced on the move, and the manner in which Brown's designs prioritised smooth rather than rugged landforms. Brown would doubtless have approved of Burke's definition of beauty in his *Philosophical Enquiry* of 1756:

Most people must have observed the sort of sense they have had, on being swiftly drawn in an easy coach, on a smooth turf, with gradual ascents and declivities. This will give a better idea of the beautiful, and point out its probable cause better than almost any thing else.¹⁰

A landscape created by Brown was thus a continuous if varied whole. It was less like a series of static pictures than the words and punctuation in a sentence, a sense neatly encapsulated in the famous conversation which Brown had with Hannah More in 1782:

⁹ Whately, T. (1770). *Observations on modern gardening* (p. 148). London.

¹⁰ Burke, E. (1756). *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and the beautiful* (p. 155). London.

He told me he compared his art to literary composition. ‘Now *there*’, said he, pointing his finger, ‘I make a comma, and *there*’, pointing to another spot, ‘where a more decided turn is proper, I make a colon; at another part, where an interruption is desirable to break the view, a parenthesis; now a full stop, and then I begin another subject.’¹¹

Brown may have employed this analogy often, for an article in the *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* for 1780, describing how the planting of a single willow had been Brown’s sole contribution to the grounds of Garrick’s villa in Hampton, noted: ‘This single addition Brown compared to punctuation, and not without some felicity of phrase, called it a dot, the presence and operation of which, as it were, made sense of the rest’.

At the heart of Brown’s designs lay a fundamental paradox, of which all were aware and accepted. While they purported to be ‘natural’ landscapes, Brown’s parks were artificial, even engineered, creations. Large areas of earth were moved, especially to obliterate traces of formal gardens, smooth the slope between house and water, open up distant views or reduce the gradient on drives and rides. Lakes in particular were unnatural, alien impositions, for outside of a few limited areas few water bodies of any size actually existed in lowland England at the start of Brown’s career. The dams required to pond back the water of natural watercourse – few of his lakes were actually excavated to any significant extent – were often complex pieces of engineering, and included tunnels and spillways to allow the lake to be emptied and to control the egress of water. At Petworth in 1756 Brown was bound to ‘make a proper plug and Trough to draw down the Water, as likewise a Grate for the discharge of waste water’; his contract for Bowood in Wiltshire in 1763 noted that there should be ‘Plugs, Grates and wastes for the discharge of floods’.¹²

Brown was not of course the only designer working in England in the middle and later decades of the eighteenth century, creating landscapes along these general lines. He must have been responsible for significantly fewer than a tenth, and probably fewer than a twentieth, of the landscape parks which existed by the time of his death in 1783. A number of other individuals, such as Nathaniel Richmond, Richard Woods, Thomas White, John Davenport, and Samuel Driver, operated successful and wide-ranging businesses. Woods, for example, is known to have undertaken at least forty-five commissions, mainly in the area around London and in Yorkshire, and on at least one occasion – at Wardour in Wiltshire in the early 1760s – was chosen by a client in preference to Brown.¹³ Richmond, discussed elsewhere in this volume by David Brown, is known to have designed at least thirty gardens and landscapes.¹⁴ Driver, although a less successful individual, was a Kentish nurseryman who prepared designs for places as far afield as Adlestrop in Gloucestershire in the early 1760s, Belhus in Essex in 1764, and Hillington in Norfolk in 1773.¹⁵ In addition to such regional or national practices, innumerable provincial land surveyors and nurserymen were also at work, providing designs for the local gentry. All were, by the 1760s, providing designs which were, for the most part, in what we would see as a broadly ‘Brownian’ mode.

It is often assumed that Brown invented this style and that other practitioners were mere ‘imitators’. Yet it is difficult, if not impossible, to show that Brown, at any point on his stylistic journey, was noticeably ahead of the stylistic curve. His designs for places like Badminton or Ingestre appear no different from the plans prepared by contemporaries like the Greening brothers or Francis Richardson in the early or mid-1750s; his more developed style of the 1760s seems much the same as that practised by men like Driver, Woods, or Richmond. Rather than seeing this form of landscaping as something invented by one individual, it is perhaps more useful to consider it simply as the style of the times. It had no single ‘inventor’. Like all great artistic movements, the ‘landscape’ style was a collaborative affair. The style presumably came to be associated so closely with Brown because he was its most commercially successful practitioner. This in turn may have been because he was also the most artistically accomplished, but at least as significant were business acumen and luck. While working at Stowe Brown made a number of influential contacts, for Viscount Temple’s social circle, ‘Cobham’s Cubs’, comprised a group of young, wealthy but disaffected Whigs who were destined to become men of influence: the young Pitts, Grenvilles, and Lyttletons all became members of the ruling elite during the period of Brown’s career. But equally important were the organisational skills he honed at Stowe, in his role as clerk of works.

¹¹ Roberts, W. (1836). *Memoirs of the life and correspondence of Mrs Hannah More* (p. 237). London.

¹² West Sussex Record Office, PHA/6623; Bowood archives, contact with Lancelot Brown, August 1762.

¹³ Cowell, F. (2009). *Richard Woods (1715–1793): Master of the pleasure garden*. Woodbridge: Boydell.

¹⁴ Brown, D. (2000). *Nathaniel Richmond (1724–1784): ‘Gentleman improver’*. Unpublished thesis (PhD, University of East Anglia).

¹⁵ Brown, D. & Williamson, T. (2016). *Lancelot Brown and the Capability men: Landscape revolution in eighteenth-century England* (pp. 118–119). London: Reaktion Books.

For Brown was, above all, a master of organisation and a consummate businessman. His bank accounts show that, by the late 1750s, he was already running a complex organisation. As David Brown has shown, the large sums of money coming into his account from clients soon went out again in the form of payments to a range of individuals, some of whom were regular associates, but others subcontractors who provided contract labour, expertise, or materials on an irregular basis. Many of these people already had successful careers, as gardeners, architects or surveyors, before coming to work with Brown.¹⁶ Some stayed with him for many years: men like Samuel Lapidge, who joined him in 1767 and who continued his business after his death in 1783; Jonathan Midgeley, who received payments from Brown from 1760 until 1778; or Benjamin Read, described as 'Mr Brown's Head servant' at Cole Green in Hertfordshire in 1756, who received payments from Brown from 1755 until 1774 and who worked at (among other places) Wootton in Buckinghamshire, Croome in Worcestershire, and Blenheim in Oxfordshire.¹⁷ Similar was Adam Mickle, whom Brown probably met at Badminton (where he was head gardener) in 1752, who had joined Brown by 1757 and who worked with him until 1765 and then, after a three-year pause (and now accompanied by his son, Adam junior) again from 1768 until 1779. Several of these individuals, including Nathaniel Richmond, Robert Robinson, and Thomas White, collaborated with Brown for a few years and then went on to make their own reputations as designers, Richmond mainly in the south-east of England, the others in Scotland and the north. White for example worked with Brown from 1759 until July 1765, at Chillington in Staffordshire, Glentworth in Lincolnshire, and Temple Newsam and Sandbeck in Yorkshire; he and his son then went on to landscape more than 200 estates, almost all in Yorkshire and Scotland. He was immensely successful in financial terms; his estates at Consett in County Durham eventually extending over an area of nearly 800 acres.¹⁸ A number of Brown's collaborators, such as Cornelius Dickinson, come and go from his accounts over the decades, each time being paid relatively small sums and presumably supplying some specialist service or advice – in this case, perhaps, relating to the construction of lakes. Brown dealt with clients, carefully considered the 'capabilities' of sites, and sketched out ideas for their improvement. But his maps and plans were drawn up by others and the execution of his designs, and often their modification in the face of practical problems – particular aspects of planting, the precise profile of a slope or the line of a lake edge – must have been worked out on the ground by this talented cadre of 'Capability Men'. In some senses, Brown became a brand; he was the Norman Foster of his age, a man above detail.

Amongst Brown's many talents was his ability to converse in a suitably witty and interesting manner with potential clients: as Chatham famously observed, 'you cannot take any other advice so intelligent or more honest'.¹⁹ However, his easy manner did not always go down well: in October 1756 Spencer Cowper advised his brother, who was employing him at Cole Green in Hertfordshire: 'As to Brown's Sauciness, I believe you have nothing to combat it with, but Patience'.²⁰ Once the commission was secured, the site assessed, and the plan for improvement made, he made only sporadic visits, to check on progress, deal with clients, and smooth over any issues that arose during the execution of the works. Lady Shelburne of Bowood in Wiltshire typically recorded how, in August 1765, 'Mr Browne the Gardener came here to dinner ... staid and spent the evening and giving directions to his Man'.²¹

A major element in Brown's success was perhaps the flexibility of his business. Different contracts might be organised in different ways. In some cases estate labour was used to implement some, or all, of a design; in others, local workmen were directly recruited and directed by one of Brown's associates. While money for particular projects often passed from clients, to contractors, through Brown's hands, it sometimes went directly, as at Chatsworth, where Michael Milliken was paid directly by the Duke for 'earth moving'. His name first appears in the estate accounts in 1760, when he received £313 in twelve separate payments; in 1761 he received a further

¹⁶ Brown, D. (2001). Lancelot Brown and his associates. *Garden History* 29(1), 2–11; Brown, D. & Williamson, T. (2016). *Lancelot Brown and the Capability Men* (pp. 135–151).

¹⁷ Brown, D. & Williamson, T. (2016). *Lancelot Brown and the Capability Men* (pp. 150); Brown's account book, RHS Lindley Library; Jacques, D. (1983). *Georgian gardens* (p. 81); Leiper, H. (2012). Mr Lancelot Brown and his Hertfordshire clients. In Spring, D. *Hertfordshire garden history, a miscellany, II: Gardens pleasant, groves delicious* (pp. 92–120, p. 97). Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press.

¹⁸ Turnbull, D. (1990). *Thomas White (1739–1811): Eighteenth-century landscape designer and arboriculturist*. Unpublished thesis (PhD, University of Hull).

¹⁹ Stroud, D. (1950). *Capability Brown* (p. 125).

²⁰ Leiper, H. (2012). Mr Lancelot Brown and his Hertfordshire clients (p. 107).

²¹ Bowood House archives.

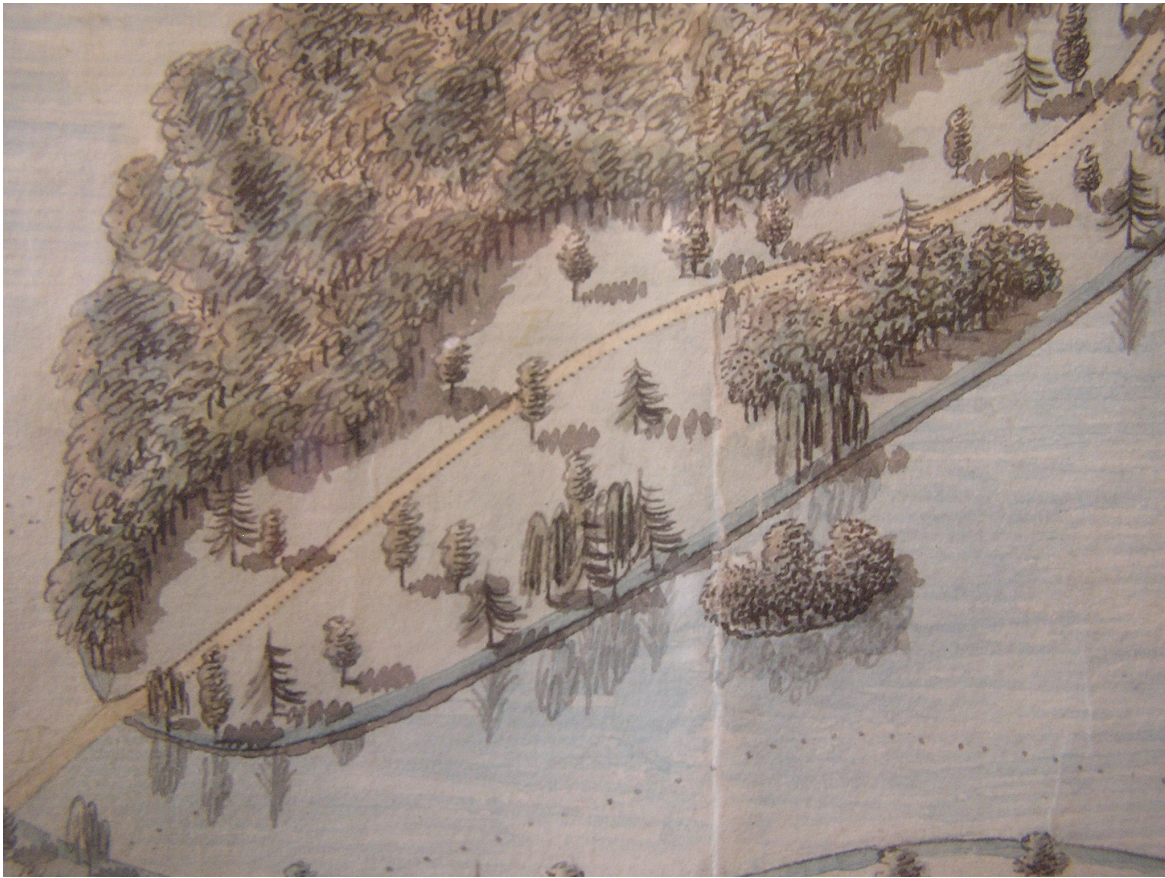


Figure 5.4: A detail from Brown's second design for Kimberley in Norfolk, 1778, showing the planting by the lake. It is typical of many Brown plans in showing a mix of deciduous trees such as weeping willows, and some exotic or coniferous planting. Photo copyright Tom Williamson, CC BY-NC 4.0.

£637; from December 1761 to October 1762, £635; and from November 1762 to November 1763 no less than £710. The final payment – of £715, made for the period 1763–65 – is described as ‘cash paid to Mr Millican on Mr Brown’s account’: this is the only direct reference to Brown himself in the estate records.²² It seems likely that some of the cases where Brown’s collaborators repeatedly appear, and disappear, from his own account may be explained by variations over time in the method by which they were paid.

What, precisely, did Brown and his team supply to clients? First and foremost, they provided the familiar, extensive, and manicured parklands, sparsely populated with ornamental buildings but well endowed with rides and drives, and planted in a manner which was perhaps more ornamental – ‘garden-like’ – than we usually assume, time having removed the conifers and weeping willows, leaving only the longer-lived indigenous or naturalised broadleaves – oak, beech, sweet chestnut, lime – and a few cedars (Figure 5.4). It was in part because of the increasingly ornamental character of their planting that the proportion of parks containing deer (their original *raison d'être*) declined steadily through the middle and later decades of the century. Brown also provided pleasure grounds, shrubberies, and flower gardens, for, in spite of what critics were beginning to assert even before the eighteenth century was over, he never really left the mansion standing ‘solitary and unconnected’ in a vast sea of grass. At Lowther (1771) amongst other places Brown’s plan marks the ‘site for the flower garden’; at Kimberley in 1778 the main feature of the design was a long, narrow ribbon of pleasure ground which extended all the way from the house to the lake; at one of his final commissions, Heveningham

²² Chatsworth archives C22, unpaginated; C21, pp. 46–47, 211–215.

in Suffolk (1782), a visitor in 1784 described a flower garden immediately to the east of the house.²³ Failure to supply an area for the display of flowers and shrubs would indeed have been odd, given that this was a period in which new plants from America and elsewhere – the consequence of Britain's expanding trading connections and new empire – were eagerly acquired by the wealthy.²⁴

But Brown and his team provided a lot more than parks and gardens. They also supplied architectural services. From 1771 Brown worked with Henry Holland (his son-in-law from 1773), but even at Stowe he had operated in an architectural capacity, with his design for the Temple of Concord and Victory raising him up 'into some degree of estimation as an architect'²⁵ During his career he provided designs for rebuilding, extending, or modernising around twenty country houses, including Lowther in Cumberland (1762), Redgrave in Suffolk (1763), Broadlands in Hampshire (1765), Peper Harrow in Sussex (1765), Fisherwick in Staffordshire (c. 1768), Temple Newsam in Yorkshire (1767), Claremont in Surrey (1770), Benham Park in Berkshire (c. 1772) (Figure 5.6), Trentham in Staffordshire (c. 1773), Tixall in Staffordshire (c. 1773), Brocklesby in Lincolnshire (1773), Cardiff Castle (1777), Cadland in Hampshire (1777), Berrington in Herefordshire (1778), and Nuneham Courtenay in Oxfordshire (1780). He and his team also happily provided new stables, ice houses, and services buildings for clients – at Kimberley in Norfolk his plan even shows a new 'drying yard' for the washing. He supplied menageries (places where collections of exotic animals were kept and displayed) and numerous kitchen gardens. And, as well as providing lakes, Brown frequently installed systems of land drainage, ensuring that the area in the immediate vicinity of the mansion, the sweep of turf between it and the lake, and the various rides and paths threading through the park, were all kept suitably dry. Brown was, to use his own words, a 'place-maker', supplying his customers with 'all the elegance and all the comforts that Mankind wants in the Country'.²⁶

All this said, it was the sweeping landscape of the park, complete with clumps, lake, and network of rides and drives, which was Brown's most distinctive contribution. What explains the popularity of this 'naturalistic' style? This is a matter over which scholars have, of course, long argued. To some, the explanation is to be sought in the realm of abstract aesthetics, and to such people the landscape park is simply the culmination of an inexorable development towards simpler, more 'naturalistic' landscapes which had begun in the 1720s with Bridgeman and which continued through the 1730s with the work of Kent and others – an idea already being promulgated within Brown's own lifetime.²⁷ To others, Brown's landscapes were expressions of philosophical or political ideas: the informal, serpentine lines of the landscape park combined 'art' and 'nature' and reflected the balanced constitution of the nation, which incorporated the principals of both democracy and monarchy.²⁸ The 'landscape' style thus emphasised the superiority of the British people, growing in pride and self-confidence as they acquired their first empire, over less fortunate nations like France, where serried rows of trees, rigid parterres, and disciplined topiary reflected the rule of absolutist monarchs. While these suggestions have much to recommend them, the popularity of the landscape park probably owed more to a number of important social, economic, and architectural developments.

Following the political upheavals of the seventeenth century, the first half of the eighteenth was a period of internal peace and stability, steady economic growth, and increasing social complexity.²⁹ Rather than being deeply divided by religion or ideology the upper strata of society began to coalesce into a single group – 'polite society', to adopt Mark Girouard's term – defined by a shared enthusiasm for fashionable consumption and relaxed social encounters, in which less attention than before was paid to nuances of social rank, or to formal etiquette. The 'polite' were made up not only of great landowners and local gentry but also included financiers, merchants, and wealthy businessmen, their numbers and importance developing apace as the nation's economy

²³ Scarfe, N. (Ed.). (1988). *A Frenchman's year in Suffolk: French impressions of Suffolk life in 1784* (p. 141). Woodbridge: Boydell.

²⁴ Laird, M. (1999). *The flowering of the English landscape garden: English pleasure grounds 1720–1800*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

²⁵ *Public Advertiser*, 9 September 1772.

²⁶ Stroud, D. (1975). *Capability Brown* (p. 157).

²⁷ Walpole, H. (1780). *The history of the modern taste in gardening*. London; Bending, S. (1994). H. Walpole and eighteenth-century garden history. *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 57, 209–226.

²⁸ Lange, B. P. (1998). The English garden and patriotic discourse. In H. J. Diller et al. *Englishness (Anglistic & Englischunterricht 46 and 47)*. Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Press.

²⁹ Langford, P. (1989). *A polite and commercial people* (pp. 59–121). Oxford: Oxford University Press; Hancock, D. (1995). *Citizens of the world: London merchants and the integration of the British Atlantic community 1735–1785*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

increased in size and grew more complex. In Girouard's words, 'polite society' was made up of the people 'who owned and ran the country'. Such individuals, whether at country house gatherings or at urban assemblies – especially at Bath – interacted in an affable manner. Keen to display their wit, their appreciation of the latest styles of clothes and other consumer goods, and their knowledge of art and culture, they conversed on easy terms and avoided overt signs of religious or other 'enthusiasm'.³⁰

Elite residences were designed for entertaining, as much as for everyday living, and Girouard has emphasised how these new forms of social interaction made novel demands on domestic space. In the early-eighteenth century even the grandest houses usually had only two principal entertaining rooms, the hall and the saloon, arranged in a line occupying the central part of the building and with their presence signalled externally by pediment or portico. Private suites of rooms, *enfilades*, led off from these, likewise arranged as linear sequences. This organisation of internal space was mirrored in the layout of the surrounding landscape, for the central axis of hall and saloon was continued as the central walk in the garden, and often extended beyond this as an avenue running through parkland or over adjacent countryside. From the late 1730s, however, the most fashionable houses began to be provided with more extensive suites of entertaining rooms, which were laid out on a circuit, and this arrangement was becoming normal by the late 1750s, especially in newly built mansions. When the house was used for entertaining, guests could drift easily from one room to the next, alternately taking tea, playing cards, and dancing.³¹

These changes had implications for the design of the landscape surrounding the mansion. As people no longer thought of, or experienced, the inside of the house as a series of linear axes, the avenues and vistas that continued these into the grounds (and beyond) fell from favour. Externally, people became more accustomed to seeing the house not as an elevation at the end of an avenue but as a series of views, experienced from a succession of angles. Moreover, the ways in which internal space was used for entertaining was replicated outside. Just as visitors made a circuit of the reception rooms inside the house, they made a circuit of the pleasure grounds – threaded with casually serpentine paths – and a more extended one of the park, stopping at points along the rides or drives to enjoy the prospect or to take tea in a temple or other building. In short, changes in social behaviour had both a direct and, through developments in domestic planning, an indirect impact on the layout of the grounds of the country house.

The rise of 'polite society' was predicated, as noted, on the emergence of a more economically diverse and commercial society – on the development, in William Blackstone's words, of the British as a 'polite and commercial people'.³² But, from the 1750s, just as Brown began to work as an independent designer, economic activity shifted up a gear: the second half of the eighteenth century was a period of rapid population growth, industrial revolution and agricultural modernisation, a great age of 'improvement'.³³ Indeed, it is impossible to exaggerate the significance of the fact that the period of Brown's career coincides precisely with this take-off into the modern world. As economic and demographic growth accelerated, new fault lines opened between the 'polite' and the increasingly impoverished members of local societies.³⁴ The clearance of farms and cottages, and the closure or diversion of roads and footpaths, which often occurred when parks were created, as well as the planting of peripheral belts, served to create insulated areas for the entertainment of the polite, places for boating on lakes, riding across the turf, and the careful preservation and shooting of game (Figure 5.5).³⁵ At the larger and more famous residences the visitors might include people with whom the owner was not even acquainted. Lybbe Powys described in 1760 how, in the park at Edgcombe in Devon, she arrived at a 'little temple', which had been 'fixed upon by a party of gentlemen and ladies, who came that day on a scheme of pleasure to Mount Edgcombe, as a place to enjoy in the most rural manner the cold collation they brought

³⁰ Girouard, M. (1978). *Life in the English country house* (pp. 189–195). London and New Haven: Yale University Press; Girouard, M. (1990). *The English town: A history of urban life* (pp. 76–77). London and New Haven: Yale University Press.

³¹ Girouard, M. (1978). *Life in the English country house* (pp. 194–203).

³² Blackstone, W. (1765). *Commentaries on the laws of England* (Vol. 3, p. 326). London.

³³ Overton, M. (1996). *Agricultural revolution in England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Pomeranz, K. (2001). *The great divergence: China, Europe, and the making of the modern world economy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Williamson, T. (2002). *The transformation of rural England: Farming and the landscape 1700–1870*. Exeter: Exeter University Press.

³⁴ Langford, P. (1989). *A polite and commercial people* (pp. 435–459); Snell, K. (1986). *Annals of the labouring poor: Social change and agrarian England 1660–1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³⁵ Felus, K. (2006). Boats and boating in the designed landscape, 1720–1820. *Garden History*, 34(1), 22–46; Munsche, P. B. (1981). *Gentlemen and poachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

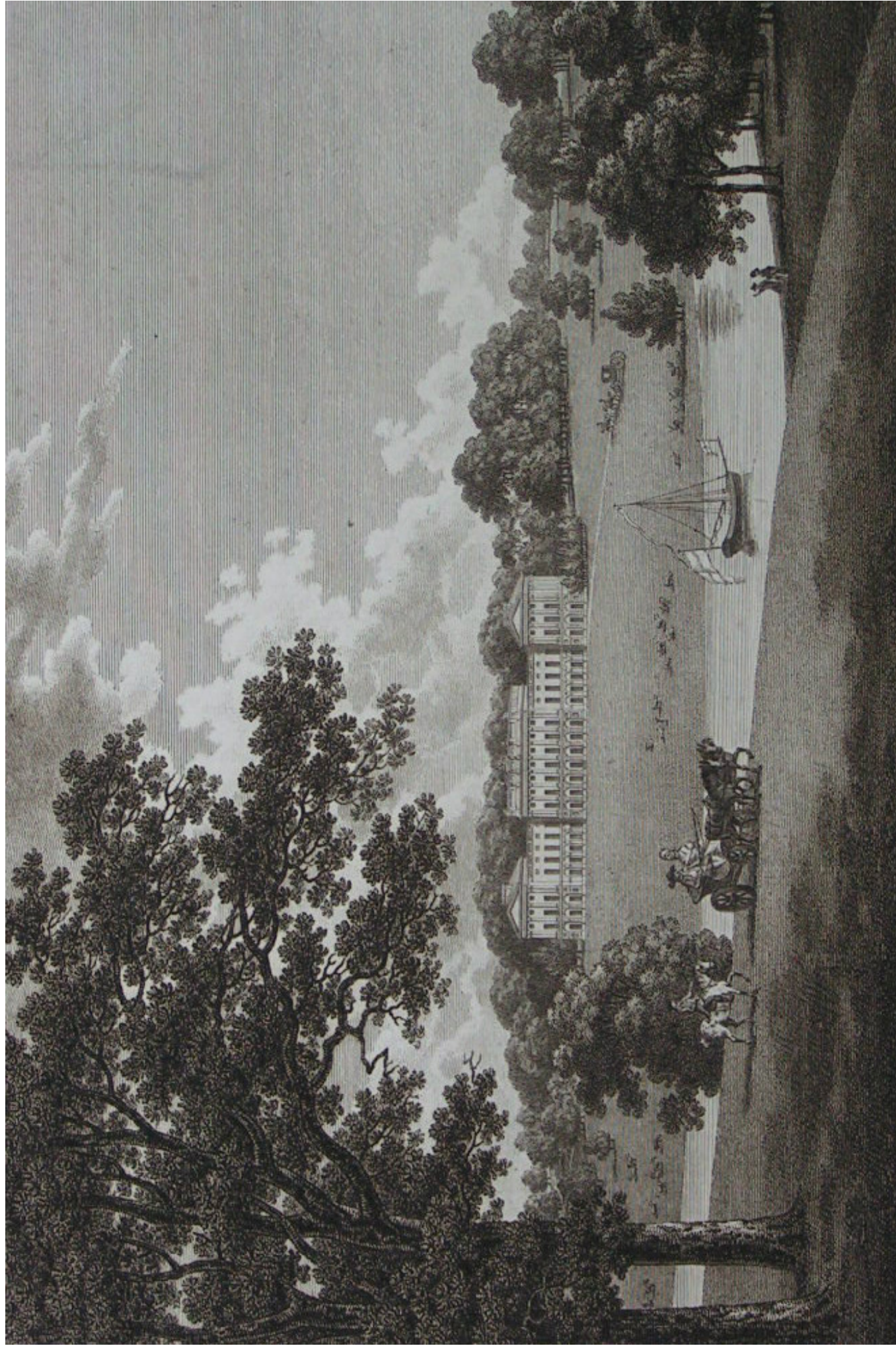


Figure 5.5: *Heveningham Hall in Suffolk*, from *The Seats of the Nobility and Gentry*, William Watts, 1779–86. A carriage approaches the hall on a gravelled drive and another runs across the smooth turf, whilst a boat sails on the lake. Photo copyright Tom Williamson, CC BY-NC 4.0.

with them.³⁶ Holkham in Norfolk, where Brown or one of his team remodelled the pleasure grounds in the 1760s, was open on 'every Tuesday, but no other day. No persons will be admitted that do not tell their names'.³⁷ In 1788 a visitor described how he:

Went what they call the home circuit, with some of the ladies and gentlemen. This is a little tour to see the grounds, different vistas etc. Rode on horseback.³⁸

Although the perimeter belts did not form an impermeable barrier, and planting and other forms of landscaping often spilled out into the surrounding countryside, it is clear that, in this increasingly polarised world, the park was a private space or, at least, one to which access was controlled, and reserved to those of appropriate status. A local poet in Bedale, North Yorkshire, recounted, in the late-eighteenth century, the changes wrought to the landscape in his lifetime, highlighting how the owner of the local house, The Rand, had removed neighbouring rights of way:

And now them roads are done away
And one made in their room
Quite to the east, of wide display,
Where you may go and come,
Quite unobserved from the Rand,
The trees do them seclude
If modern times, do call such grand
Its from a gloomy mood³⁹

Separation of the 'polite' from the wider mass of the agricultural population, farmers and labourers, was signalled in other ways by the 'landscape' style. Its triumph saw the culmination of a process which had been continuing throughout the eighteenth century. Not only were enclosed formal gardens swept away from the walls of the country house by Brown and his contemporary designers, but also a range of productive or semi-productive facilities, such as orchards, fish ponds, dovecotes, barns, and farm yards. At the start of the century even the owner of a great house like Chatsworth might be happy look out across a rabbit warren. By the 1760s, such things were seen as uncouth by members of a group now more interested in fashionable *consumption* than domestic production. The warren at Chatsworth was the first thing to be targeted for removal when Brown began to work there in the late 1750s.⁴⁰

It was noted above how changes in domestic planning influenced the rise of the 'natural' style of landscape design. Developments in architectural *style* were also probably important in its genesis. At around the time that Brown's mature style was developing, the long-standing dominance of Palladianism was beginning to be challenged, as a more accurate knowledge of classical architecture began to be disseminated as a result of excavations at places like Herculaneum and Pompeii, and of archaeological expeditions to Greece.⁴¹ English architects such as Nicholas Revett and, in particular, Robert Adam, began to provide designs for country houses which were more closely based on Greek and Roman precedents, and which were informed by a more general taste for simplicity in form and outline which was derived from these.⁴² More importantly, 'neo-classicism' also embraced aspects of interior design, for the light, delicate painted scheme uncovered by excavations, at Herculaneum especially, were now adopted by Adam and others, as a model for the interior design of country houses. The new taste also influenced the design of a range of consumer goods, from the pottery produced by Josiah Wedgwood, decorated with figures in classical dress, florets, urns, and the like, to the elegant furniture of Thomas Chippendale.⁴³

³⁶ Climençon, E. J. (Ed.). (1899). *Passages from the diaries of Mrs Phillip Lybbe Powys, 1756–1808* (p. 39). London.

³⁷ Goodwyn, E. A. (1972). *Selections from Norwich newspapers, 1760–1790* (p. 15). Ipswich: East Anglian Magazine.

³⁸ Cozens-Hardy, B. (1950). *The diary of Sylls Neville 1767–1788* (p. 379). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³⁹ Lewis, L. (Ed.). (1990). *Hird's annals of Bedale* (stanzas 675–676). Northallerton: North Yorkshire County Council.

⁴⁰ Chatsworth House archives, AS/1062 and 1063.

⁴¹ Irwin, D. (1997). *Neoclassicism*. London: Phaidon; Honour, H. (1977). *Neo-classicism*. London: Penguin.

⁴² Fleming, J. (1962). *Robert Adam and his circle in Edinburgh and Rome*. London: John Murray; Beard, G. (1992). *The work of Robert Adam*. London: Bloomsbury.

⁴³ Gilbert, C. (1978). *The life and works of Thomas Chippendale*. London: Studio Vista; Reilly, R. (1992). *Josiah Wedgwood 1730–1795*. London: Macmillan.



Figure 5.6: *Benham Park near Newbury, Berkshire, viewed from the south.* Built in the late 1770s, this neo-classical composition by Brown and Holland appears in perfect harmony with its minimalist landscape. The upper floor is a nineteenth-century addition. Photo copyright Tom Williamson, CC BY-NC 4.0.

Brown and his business could hardly have been immune from this major shift in taste. Many of Brown's landscapes complemented houses which were built or remodelled by Adam or other neo-classical architects. By the late 1760s, moreover, at Claremont, he and Henry Holland were producing an architectural design which was more neo-classical than Palladian in inspiration, and by the 1770s places like Benham Park in Berkshire or Berrington in Herefordshire were wholly neo-classical in style. It is easy to see how the simplicity, almost minimalism, of Brown's landscapes echoed the principals of the new architecture, emphasising as it did planes and distinct, continuous outlines, in contrast to the fussiness and detail of the rococo: a landscape designed by Brown made a perfect setting for a neo-classical house (Figure 5.6). Brown would surely have shared Adam's enthusiasm for the simple and the 'pure', his rejection of 'superfluous ornament', and above all his belief that architectural forms were to be derived from nature's beauties, distilled through examination and abstraction. For Brown, landscaping was a matter not of ephemeral fashion or whim but of systematic observation and the application of appropriate enhancements. In his own words:

Place-making, and a good English Garden, depend intirely upon Principle and have very little to do with Fashion, for it is a word that in my opinion disgraces Science wherever it is found.⁴⁴

There were wider implications in all this, for neo-classicism was not simply about harking back to antiquity. At its core was the idea that the forms of ancient Greece and Rome were to be improved upon, not just

⁴⁴ Stroud, D. (1975). *Capability Brown* (p. 157).

slavishly copied, in this age of science and industry.⁴⁵ Right across Europe the new taste was closely allied with the spirit of the Enlightenment. In Hugh Honour's words, 'Neoclassicism, in its most vital expressions ... sought to bring about – whether by patient scientific advance or by purgative return *à la* Rousseau to primitive simplicity and purity – a new and better world governed by the immutable laws of reason and equity ...'.⁴⁶ In England, similarly, the style appealed to those with an enthusiasm for modernisation. Yet at the same time it offered a measure of reassurance, for to contemporaries the classical past appeared not only rational but also *stable*. Neo-classicism, to quote Hilary Young, was popular because it offered a 'fusion of modernity with Classicism, a combination that allowed the middle and upper classes to feel at ease with the march of progress'.⁴⁷

Neo-classicism was thus indissolubly linked with the concept of 'improvement', a term widely employed by contemporaries for a wide range of changes to the physical environment. The reclamation of marginal land, the adoption of new farming methods, the creation of fashionable town centres for the entertainment of the 'polite', the establishment of plantations, and the construction of new mansions and the creation of fashionable landscapes in which to set them, could all be so described.⁴⁸ The term was also applied to the many improvements in transport infrastructure which occurred during Brown's lifetime, and which underpinned economic expansion. Over 300 Turnpike Acts were passed between 1750 and 1760 alone, affecting some 10,000 miles of road, and the canal network began to develop in earnest with the construction of the Bridgewater Canal, connecting the Duke of Bridgewater's coal mines at Worsley with Manchester, between 1759 and 1761 – precisely the same years in which the Duke's grounds at Ashridge in Hertfordshire were being landscaped by Brown.⁴⁹ Common to all these activities was the belief that the world could be transformed by scientific observation and the application of will and capital: the present state of things was not God-given and immutable, but provisional, and capable of change. It is easy to see how Brown, with his highly commercialised business and his famous moniker, formed part of this wider spirit of modernisation.

Indeed, it is useful to consider some aspects of Brown's activities as versions of contemporary 'improvements' applied, as it were, on a domestic scale. Water control, so important in Brown's landscapes, was a central feature of the period. Apart from the importance of canals in underpinning economic growth, agricultural land drainage was being adopted on an ever-increasing scale and most industry was powered by water, involving the construction of often complex systems of reservoirs and leats.⁵⁰ Brown's lakes, serpentine rivers, and extensive drainage schemes fit into a wider pattern. Also striking are the relationships between the numerous rides and drives which threaded through the Brownian park, and contemporary improvements in road transport. The rapid increase in road traffic resulting from turnpiking led to popular demands for shorter routes, and thus to a marked upsurge in bridge construction.⁵¹ Bridges were a pleasing and topical novelty, and it is no coincidence that they feature in so many of Brown's parks, with the approach drive often brought, usually gratuitously, across a suitably widened river (as at Chatsworth), a narrow lake (as at Shortgrove in Essex), or one arm of a larger lake (as at Bowood). More importantly, as the condition of the main public roads got better, there were significant improvements in the design of carriages, especially in methods of suspension. They also encouraged the development. The 1740s, 50s, and 60s saw the appearance of new types of small, light pleasure vehicle: the landau – a four-wheeled carriage with a two-part hood that could be thrown back so that passengers might enjoy the open air; the curricle – a light two-wheeled carriage; and the phaeton – a light open-topped vehicle on which the seats were raised high above the ground, and which was known for its ability to negotiate sharp bends, the sports car of its age.⁵² Now that major roads were less likely to be pitted with potholes, driving could be an enjoyable leisure activity: few people in 1700 would have thought of driving for fun. The drives and rides in Brown's parks thus reflected new attitudes towards travel in horse-drawn vehicles, and the new forms of such

⁴⁵ Honour, H. (1977). *Neo-classicism* (pp. 101–114); Forty, A. (1986). *Objects of desire: Design and society since 1750* (p. 24). London: Thames and Hudson.

⁴⁶ Honour, H. (1977). *Neo-classicism* (p. 13).

⁴⁷ Young, H. (1995). *The genius of Wedgwood* (p. 13). London: Victoria and Albert Museum.

⁴⁸ Tarlow, S. (2007). *The archaeology of improvement in Britain, 1750–1860*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁴⁹ Cossons, N. (1987). *The BP book of industrial archaeology* (pp. 254–258). Newton Abbot: David and Charles; Bogart, D. (2005). Did turnpike trusts increase transportation investment in eighteenth-century England? *The Journal of Economic History*, 65(2), 439–468; Albert, W. (1972). *The turnpike road system in England 1663–1840*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁵⁰ Williamson, T. (2002). *The transformation of rural England* (pp. 85–91).

⁵¹ Cossons, N. (1987). *The BP book of industrial archaeology* (pp. 244–245).

⁵² Ingram, A. (1977). *Horse-drawn vehicles since 1760*. Blandford: Blandford Press.

vehicles which were now available to the rich and fashionable. Indeed, it is hard to see how Brown's style, so dependent on movement, could have developed without them.

Brown was an artistic genius: even the most sceptical of historians cannot fail to be moved by the sheer magnificence of landscapes like Bowood or Chatsworth. But his personal success probably owed at least as much to luck, organisational skills, hard work, and business acumen. It remains unclear whether he was in any meaningful sense the 'inventor' of the style we now identify so closely with him. But, either way, the character of that style – like that of all fashions in landscape design – is best understood within a range of specific social, economic, and architectural contexts, as well as in terms of changing modes of business organisation. In the final analysis, the landscape park was a commodity, and its success was a consequence of the appeal it held for wealthy customers at a crucial period in Britain's history.

Select Bibliography

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