

Lancelot Brown and local history

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This year, garden historians everywhere are celebrating the tercentenary of the birth of Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown, unquestionably the most famous of all English landscape designers. As most readers will be aware, Brown flourished in the middle and later decades of the eighteenth century and, together with less famous contemporaries, was responsible for bringing to fruition a move away from formal and geometric styles of garden design, towards a more ‘natural’ kind of landscaping, which had been emerging slowly for several decades. Garden enclosed by walls and hedges, avenues, and all other forms of geometric planting were now decisively swept away from around the homes of the wealthy—everything straight, symmetrical and regular was eschewed. Instead, fashionable residences were set within ‘landscape parks’, comprising wide prospects of turf, scattered with trees and clumps of woodland, and surrounded in whole or part by a perimeter woodland belt. Wherever topography and money permitted, Brown and his fellow designers would provide a lake of serpentine or irregular form, placed if possible in the middle distance of the view from the mansion. Often they supplied an ornamental building, such as a classical temple or two, although seldom more.¹ Perhaps most importantly, they laid out a number of serpentine drives and rides within the park, often running in and out of the perimeter belt and passing *en route* points of interest, or places which commanded particularly appealing views. 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*. Brown’s designs were supposedly so ‘natural’ in appearance, and so decidedly English in character, that Horace Walpole believed that ‘he will be least remembered: so closely did he copy nature that his works will be mistaken for it’.²

Lancelot Brown was born in 1716 at Kirkhale in Northumberland. Many historians have suggested that he had lowly origins, but this is an exaggeration, for his father was a prosperous farmer and his brother John married the daughter of the local squire, Sir William Lorraine, apparently without scandal or objection. Brown himself, moreover, attended the local grammar school until he was sixteen—hardly a sign of an impoverished background. He afterwards worked on Sir William’s estate for seven years, where he probably learnt much about estate management and forestry. In 1739 he moved south, first to work at Grimsthorpe in Lincolnshire and subsequently on a number of Midland estates, where he seems to have been involved in the design of ornamental lakes.³ In 1742 he took up a post at Stowe in Buckinghamshire. Here Richard Temple, first Viscount Cobham, had been busy creating complex and irregular gardens for over 20 years with a succession of talented architects and designers, including Charles Bridgeman, Sir John Vanbrugh, James Gibbs and William Kent.⁴ Brown worked in essence as the clerk of works, organising payments and contracts, but in time made his own mark, designing the Temple of Concord and Victory and other buildings in the grounds, ‘which raised him into some degree of estimation as an architect’.⁵

While still employed at Stowe he took on a number of other commissions, for friends of Lord Cobham. After the latter’s death in 1749 Brown left Stowe and moved to Hammersmith near London. Here he established himself as a landscape designer, gradually building up his business so that by 1760 he had undertaken perhaps thirty major commissions. From 1764 he occupied the post of Master Gardener at Hampton Court and lived in a house in the Palace grounds, and over the following years became a household name, ‘Capability’ Brown, ‘the great Arbiter of British Taste’.⁶ By the time he died in 1783 he had carried out perhaps 240 commissions and was the owner of a modest landed estate at Fenstanton in Huntingdonshire.

Brown was a brilliant artist, but we must be careful not to exaggerate the scale of his achievement. Although he was responsible for designing many fine landscapes, he was only one of many talented ‘improvers’ at work in England in the middle and later decades of the eighteenth century, for by the time of his death there were several thousand landscape parks in existence. Some of these designers, such as Richard Woods, worked throughout England and might, on occasions, be preferred by wealthy clients over Brown himself. Others were more local practitioners, nurserymen or surveyors based in major provincial centres. Brown was the most financially successful of a much wider body of professional designers, having worked hard to exploit connections made during his time at Stowe.

Moreover, Brown’s style was not as original as is sometimes suggested. He is often credited with having ‘swept away’ walled, geometric gardens but, as noted earlier, the old formal styles of design had been in retreat for decades, and even in the 1710s the grounds of the most fashionable residences were being laid out in a simpler

manner than before, with plain grass lawns, gravel paths, and extensive woodland gardens or ‘wildernesses’. Through the 1720s and ‘30s these developments were taken further, as such designers as Charles Bridgeman developed a more extensive version of this stripped-down formality, which embraced not only the gardens around the house but also the wider parkland. Indeed, it was he rather than Brown who first made extensive use of the ha-ha to hide the boundary between the garden and the park.⁷ Large, irregularly-shaped lakes began to appear in the 1720s and ‘30s, at the same time as classical buildings began to be erected in both gardens and the park. From the 1730s, moreover, William Kent was laying out irregular, serpentine gardens, not only at Stowe but at other important residences, such as Holkham in Norfolk. With their rather structured informality—serpentine rivers, classical buildings, and exotic planting—Kent’s designs were modelled closely on the paintings of idealised Italian landscape by artists like Claude Lorraine and Nicolas Poussin, hung on the walls of fashionable residences.

During the 1740s there were further developments as these serpentine gardens—which always remained one section of landscapes otherwise still laid out in a geometric manner—came to feature a wider variety of ornamental structures. Classical temples were joined by gothic ruins, hermitages, Chinese pagodas and ‘Turkish tents’. Such structures were interspersed with complex planting employing the latest shrubs and flowers imported from the Americas and elsewhere to create a kind of cluttered, rather fussy garden often described as ‘rococo’ by garden historians.⁸ Brown, in short, did not invent serpentine landscapes, or even such features as large, irregular lakes. Indeed, as early as 1739, the year he came 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’.⁹

Brown’s originality can be exaggerated in another way. His style did not appear, fully formed, at the start of his career but instead developed gradually over time. His early works, at places like Ingestre in Staffordshire and Badminton in Gloucestershire, were little different to other gardens laid out at the time in a broadly ‘rococo’ style. They were cluttered with buildings, displayed a rather mannered irregularity, and still co-existed with geometric features. Indeed, most of his energies were directed towards gardens and pleasure grounds in the immediate setting of the house, rather than to the wider landscape. For example, even in the late 1750s at Moor Park in Hertfordshire he modified an existing design by Charles Bridgeman to create an extensive, ‘naturalistic’ pleasure ground to the east of the mansion. But he seems to have done nothing in the parkland beyond, which continued to be filled with a dense mesh of avenues, some planted by Bridgeman and some of seventeenth-century date.¹⁰

1 Kimberley, Norfolk, showing the classic Brown design feature of an expanse of smooth turf extending uninterrupted from house to water

2 Brown’s magnificent lake at Castle Ashby, Northamptonshire

Brown’s style was developing fast, however, and by the end of the 1750s one of its key features was firmly in place. This was the recurrent, almost formulaic arrangement in which the mansion looked down across a smooth slope of turf to an irregular or serpentine area of water beyond (figure 1). He now began to design on a grander scale, moreover, paying particular attention to drives and approaches and gradually reducing the numbers of ornamental buildings employed in his designs. By the early 1760s all the elements of his style were firmly in place, including the multiplicity of gravelled drives and rides and the continuous or near-continuous perimeter belt. By this stage, too, his designs were becoming, in a sense, minimalist, relying on trees, water and the natural topography to create landscapes of serpentine simplicity. The natural landforms—their outlines suitably smoothed by excavation and earth-moving—were the key feature. Their shape and disposition were revealed and accentuated by planting and by the use of water: one of the purposes of his lakes was, arguably, to emphasise the shape of the land, the subtlety and complexity of the contours: contemporary illustrations make it clear that the sides of his water bodies were kept scrupulously clear of marginal vegetation (figure 2). Brown’s perimeter belts often followed the line of rising ground, as for example at Chatsworth, with the very boundaries of the park thus emerging, as it were, from the topography.

His style thus developed gradually through the 1750s and ‘60s, and what we now think of as the ‘typical’ Brown landscape only gradually emerged. What is particularly interesting, however, is that it is very hard to show—at any point in this stylistic journey—that he was setting the pace, with other designers merely following his lead. His early designs, at places like Badminton (1762) or Ingestre (1756), are indistinguishable from those of contemporary designers such as Thomas and Robert Greening; those of the late 1750s seem very similar to the creations of individuals like Francis Richardson; while by the 1760s a host of designers, including Samuel Driver, Nathaniel Richardson and Richard Woods, were creating expansive parklands with lakes, clumps, and serpentine drives.¹¹ Nevertheless, Brown was by this stage creaming off the wealthiest clients, the individuals who had the money for the most expensive improvements, such as lake-making, and his compositions were thus usually carried out on a scale, and with an attention to detail, which his rivals could rarely match.

Many features of Brown's style have been misunderstood by later generations. Thus, it is often suggested that he had little interest in gardens, but that would be surprising at a time when new imports of plants from America and elsewhere—the consequence of Britain's expanding trading connections and new empire—were being eagerly acquired by the wealthier elements of society. In fact his pleasure grounds, and those of his rival designers, continued to be large and complex, featuring serpentine paths, shrubberies and scattered specimen trees (figure 3). In addition, while we tend to think of Brown primarily as a designer of landscapes, he also supplied his clients with other things. He worked as much as an architect as he did as a landscape designer, not only supplying garden buildings but also making improvements to country houses, or even providing completely new ones. Beginning in the 1750s, and working from 1771 with Henry Holland (his son-in-law from 1773), he provided designs for rebuilding, or extensively modernising, around twenty country houses, including Lowther (Cumberland) 1762, Redgrave (Suffolk) 1763, Broadlands (Hampshire) 1765, Peper Harrow (Surrey) 1765, Fisherwick (Staffordshire) c.1768, Temple Newsham (Yorkshire) 1767, Claremont (Surrey) 1770, Benham Park (Berkshire) c.1772, Trentham (Staffordshire) c.1773, Tixall (Staffordshire) c.1773, Brocklesby (Lincolnshire) 1773, Cardiff Castle 1777, Cadland (Hampshire) 1777, Berrington (Herefordshire) 1778 and Nuneham Courtenay (Oxfordshire) 1780. He also happily included new stables, ice houses, and services buildings: at Kimberley in Norfolk his plan even shows a new 'drying yard' for the washing. He provided menageries, where collections of exotic animals were kept and displayed, and numerous kitchen gardens. He was, to use his own words, a 'place-maker' who supplied his customers with 'all the elegance and all the comforts that Mankind wants in the Country'.¹²

3 Brown's second plan for Kimberley in Norfolk, drawn up in 1778, featured a large area of pleasure ground which contained an elaborate greenhouse, and extended as a narrow ribbon of grass and trees, past the kitchen garden, to the lake edge. Here there was to be a bridge, providing access to the island, and beyond to the woodland on the far shore. The kitchen garden was modernised by Brown, who added an elaborate 'hot wall'.

In 1753, the first year of his account at Drummonds Bank, his recorded receipts totalled £4924; by 1768 this had risen to £32,279, an enormous sum, equivalent to several million pounds today. Immense sums thus went into his bank account from clients, but very large ones soon went out again. From the late 1750s Brown was making substantial, but intermittent and variable, payments to a range of individuals. These disbursements do not for the most part represent salaries paid to 'foremen', but were instead contract payments made to colleagues or sub-contractors, experts in their own particular fields and men who, before they worked for Brown, often had successful careers as landscape designers, architects, surveyors or similar.¹³ Some of these individuals worked with him for many years: men like Samuel Lapidge, who joined him in 1767 and who continued the business after Brown's death in 1783; or Jonathan Midgeley, who received payments from Brown from 1760 until 1778.¹⁴ Others, like Nathaniel Richmond or Robert Robinson, collaborated with him for a few years and then went on to make their own reputations as designers, the former mainly in south-east England and the latter in Scotland and the north.¹⁵ Some, such as Cornelius Dickinson, come and go from Brown's 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.¹⁶ 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, were in the hands of a talented cadre of 'Capability Men'. In some senses, Brown was a brand; he was the Norman Foster of his age.

Brown's fully-developed landscape style, although it owed much to the work of earlier designers like William Kent, differed from theirs in crucial ways. Previous forms of irregular, serpentine landscaping, as we have seen, had co-existed with avenues and other geometric features; but from the 1760s such elements were only occasionally retained by Brown, usually if clients insisted upon it. Moreover, whereas earlier forms of 'landscape garden' had employed features and buildings to convey messages, ideas and emotions, in Brown's designs it was the landscape itself—the massing of trees, the disposition of water and the shapes of landforms—that was the message. The former designs, moreover, had worked as a series of set-piece views, but Brown's parklands were designed to be experienced as an entirety, and through *movement*, along rides and drives, on horseback or in a carriage. This was perhaps their greatest novelty. Thomas Whately in 1770 described the approach to Caversham House in Berkshire, where Brown had landscaped the grounds a few years earlier, almost like a moving film ...

'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'¹⁷

... and so on, the passage continuing in this manner for nearly a thousand words. Brown himself emphasised the way in which his compositions were continuous, textured wholes, rather than a series of fragmentary views. He compared them to sentences, structured by words and punctuation. An article in the *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* for 1780 described how the planting of a single willow tree had been Brown's sole contribution to the

grounds of the actor David Garrick's villa in Hampton near London, going on to note: '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'.¹⁸ In a similar way, Hannah More recounted how in 1782 she:

Passed two hours in the garden ... with my friend Mr Brown. I took a very agreeable lecture from him in his art, and he promised to give me taste by inoculation. He illustrates everything he says about gardening by some literary or grammatical allusion. 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."¹⁹

The proliferation of rides and drives in Brown's landscapes was inextricably linked to this sense of the landscape as a continuous whole, rather than a series of separate and fragmented experiences. It was also related to the smoothness of landforms so favoured by Brown, and where necessary created through large schemes of earth-moving. He would doubtless have approved of Burke's definition of beauty which appeared, significantly, in 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.²⁰

This said, some carefully composed prospects were exploited and given prominence in Brown's designs, and the few ornamental buildings employed were positioned in such a way that they formed both the focus for a view, and a vantage point from which the best prospects across the landscape could be enjoyed. Located beside one of the main drives, they were places of resort and were often provided with facilities for making tea and preparing light refreshments. Yet while some temples, ruins and similar ornamental structures continued to feature in his compositions, the key 'garden building' was now the mansion itself. This was the key focus of the views from the rides and drives threading through the park, and a feature to be revealed—teasingly or suddenly—on the main approach.

At the heart of Brown's designs lay a fundamental paradox, which all observers were aware of 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 signs of formal gardens, smooth the slope between house and water, and sometimes to open up distant views or to reduce the gradient on drives and rides. At Chatsworth in Derbyshire, for example, Brown's man Michael Milliken worked for four years levelling many of the terraces of the old gardens, filling in the fish ponds and—in particular—grading the sides of the river Derwent, so that it would be visible from the windows of the mansion. Milliken was paid directly by the Duke of Devonshire for 'earth moving', receiving a total of £2235.²¹ Lakes were in reality unnatural and alien impositions on the landscape, for except in limited areas such as the Norfolk Broads there were few water bodies of any size in lowland England at the start of Brown's career. Most of his lakes were made by constructing a dam across a stream or river, and ponding the water back behind it. The dams were often complex pieces of engineering, incorporating tunnels or spillways to allow the lake to be emptied for maintenance and to control the egress of water, so that levels could be maintained and to ensure that the dam was not damaged by being over-topped by water at time of spate.²² Brown's contracts for Petworth in Sussex in 1756 bound him to 'make a proper plug and Trough to draw down the Water, as likewise a Grate for the discharge of waste water'; that for Bowood in Wiltshire in 1763 noted that there should be 'Plugs, Grates and wastes for the discharge of floods'.²³ Many of Brown's dams had an ornamental cascade on the lower side, as at Charlecote in Oxfordshire. Others, as at Fisherwick in Staffordshire, were disguised as 'sham bridges'. Some dams, like those of his contemporary designers, had a thick layer of clay on the lake side, covered by a pitching of stones; but sometimes there was a thick central core of clay, especially where the lake had to support the heavy rockwork of a cascade.²⁴ Provision was often made to reduce the rate of silting by providing a bypass channel along which water could be diverted at times of spate or, as at Bowood, by giving the arms of the lake small but separate water bodies at their upper ends, retained by small dams or slip ways and acting as silt traps. Moreover, while in broad terms the shape of each lake was usually determined by topography, with the retained water simply filling back up the valley behind the dam, nature might need a helping hand. Brown staked out the intended outline on the ground prior to construction but, unless his eye for contours was perfect, his prediction will not always have been correct and some excavation—perhaps to widen a lake and bring it into better view of the mansion—might be required.

Garden historians and others have long argued about why the style we now identify with Lancelot Brown became so popular in the 1760s and '70s; and debate continues to rage. To some, the explanation is to be sought in the realm of abstract aesthetics—in such a view the landscape park is simply the culmination of an inexorable development towards simpler, more 'naturalistic' landscapes which had begun in the 1720s with Charles Bridgeman and which continued through the 1730s with the work of William Kent and others.²⁵ Other historians, following a number of contemporary commentators, have interpreted Brown's landscapes primarily as expressions of philosophical or political ideas. The manner in which the informal, serpentine lines of the

landscape park combined ‘art’ and ‘nature’ reflected the balanced constitution of the nation, which incorporated the principals of both democracy and monarchy.²⁶ Brown’s landscapes thus emphasised the difference between Britain, its people growing in pride and self-confidence as they acquired their first empire, and less fortunate nations like France, where the rule of absolutist monarchs was expressed in the serried rows of trees, rigid parterres, and disciplined topiary laid out around vast palaces like Versailles. While these suggestions have much to recommend them, in truth the popularity of the landscape park probably owed more to a number of important social and economic developments.

Following the political upheavals and civil warfare of the seventeenth century, the first half of the eighteenth century was a period of internal peace and stability in Britain, and of steady economic growth. Rather than being deeply divided by religion or ideology, as they had been during the Civil War and Commonwealth, the upper strata of society began to coalesce into a single group—often referred to as ‘polite society’—which was united around a shared enthusiasm for fashionable consumption and relaxed social encounters. At urban assemblies or at country house gatherings, people of fashion now paid less attention to nuances of social rank, or to the demands of formal etiquette, and instead interacted on easy, affable terms, carefully avoiding signs of religious or other ‘enthusiasm’ and keen to display their wit, their appreciation of the latest styles of clothes and other consumer goods, and their knowledge of art and culture.²⁷ The ‘polite’ included not only the great landowners and the local gentry but also a new class of financiers, merchants and wealthy businessmen, a symptom of the increasing size and complexity of the nation’s economy. In Girouard’s words, ‘polite society’ was made up of the people ‘who owned and ran the country’.²⁸

During the period of Brown’s career the pace of economic growth stepped up a gear. From the 1750s the population started to increase rapidly, and in the north and west of the country the pace of industrialisation accelerated, with rapid expansion in the production of coal, iron and textiles. Farming was also transformed with the widespread adoption of new crops and rotations, and new agricultural techniques like marling and land drainage; the enclosure of the remaining open fields; and the reclamation of tracts of common land. This was the period of the classic ‘agricultural revolution’. These great economic changes were underpinned by major improvements in transport infrastructure. Over 300 turnpike acts 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.²⁹ Contemporaries applied the word ‘improvement’ to these and many other changes to the physical environment: the construction of roads and bridges, the reclamation of marginal land, 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.³⁰ Common to all 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 dedicated to realising the ‘capabilities’ of a place, formed part of this wider pattern of modernisation.

Most of Brown’s clients, whether they were established landowners or members of the newly-rich, were thoroughly immersed in this new world of enterprise and empire. Few derived their incomes solely or even primarily from agricultural rents or the produce of their estates, but rather from investments, the profits of high office, control over mineral resources, and trade. The Lascelles family, whose grounds at Harewood House in Yorkshire were landscaped by Brown, derived much of their wealth from their extensive plantations in Barbados, worked by nearly 3000 slaves.³¹ Brown’s activities at Chatsworth in Derbyshire began in 1759, the year before the lease on the Duke of Devonshire’s copper mines at Ecton in Staffordshire was to run out, and just after ore deposits of exceptional quality had been discovered there.³² Moreover, this was a world increasingly geared around urban life, in London, Bath and provincial social centres like Bristol and Norwich. The culture of the ‘polite’ was essentially urban rather than rural, and it is in this context in particular that we need to understand the style of Brown’s landscapes.

The first point to emphasise is that parks *per se* were not new. They had existed for centuries, but in the form of well-wooded venison farms and hunting grounds. Brown and his contemporaries took this ancient symbol of elite status and provided it with a fashionable makeover, giving it an elegant veneer more suited to the age, with more ornamental and carefully considered planting.³³ Deer had been the original *raison d’être* of parks, and as late as 1750 most people would have thought of parks as enclosures in which they were kept: county maps continued to depict parks as circuits of deer-proof fencing well into the 1760s. But by this stage the connection between deer and parks had been loosened. Some existing parks lost their deer, while new one (and large numbers of new ones were created in this period) were usually grazed only by sheep and cattle. Indeed, one of the key achievements of Brown and his fellow designers was to divorce the concept of the park from any necessary association with deer. At some of the places where he worked his canvas was an existing deer park, and deer continued to be kept there by his clients, as at Petworth or Sledmere. But many of his commissions, such as Shortgrove, Broadlands or Croome, involved creating park landscapes which were grazed by domestic livestock alone. By the end of the century only a relatively small minority of parks contained deer.

In part this change reflects the fact that deer are voracious grazers, difficult to keep out of clumps and shrubberies, so that the more elaborately planted parks became, the less they could be used for venison farming. But the separation of deer and parks was also associated with the fact that, as parks proliferated, they descended the social scale. By the end of the eighteenth century even quite minor landowners could boast their own 'park'. But while such men could afford to create a private ornamental landscape of grass and trees, they were less able to manage the greater expense of encircling this with a deer-proof fence, and maintaining a herd of deer within it. The change also mirrored a wider decline in interest, on the part of the elite, in traditional forms of livestock husbandry, involving the exploitation of semi-wild species. For though parks might survive, albeit in a newly aestheticised form, other traditional aspects of the country house landscape, which had once affirmed the owner's direct involvement in the productive life of the countryside, were now banished. Rabbit warrens, fish ponds and dovecotes, along with farmyards, orchards, nut grounds and vegetable gardens were removed from the immediate vicinity of the mansion, at the same time as enclosed and geometric gardens were destroyed. Such features seemed inappropriate to an elite now dedicated to fashionable *consumption*, rather than active *production*. They made their homes look too much like the farmhouses of their tenants.

Parks thus proliferated through the second half of the century, not least because they were now cheaper to create and maintain. Suitably transformed by the hand of taste, they not only became the most prominent setting for the great house, but they also served as insulated and private spaces, surrounded by their woods and plantation belts, at a time when rapid population growth caused escalating rural poverty and rising social tensions. Park creation sometimes involved the removal of farms and cottages, even whole settlements. It was almost always associated with the closure of footpaths and the diversion of public roads, which was made easier by legal changes in the early 1770s—the advent of road closure orders. But not everyone was excluded from the park. The landscapes of Brown and his contemporaries were designed for the entertainment of the 'polite', meaning the owner, his family and their guests. Lakes were for boating on, rides and drives were for riding and driving along, while belts and clumps served as places to breed and protect pheasants at a time when shooting was becoming more organised and poaching was an increasing problem (figure 4). Some of the larger parks were open to strangers of the appropriate status, either on an informal basis or on specified days; Holkham in Norfolk, for example, was open from at least 1760 on 'every Tuesday, but no other day. No persons will be admitted that do not tell their names'.³⁴

4 Heveningham Hall in Suffolk, as depicted in William Watts' *The Seats of the Nobility and Gentry*, with carriages running across the smooth turf of Brown's park, and a boat sailing on his lake

The great houses which lay at the heart of the park likewise developed in ways which made them more suitable for the needs of 'polite society', and especially for the new forms of social engagement developing through the first half of the eighteenth century. At the start of the century even the grandest of houses usually had only two principal entertaining rooms, the hall and the saloon, the latter lying behind the former and the two together taking up the central part of the building. Their presence was signalled externally by the presence of a pediment or portico. Private suites of rooms ran off from these, arranged as linear sequences of increasing privacy known as *enfilades*.³⁵ This arrangement of internal space along strongly linear axes was mirrored in the layout of the surrounding landscape. The central axis of hall and saloon was thus continued as the central walk in the garden, and extended beyond this as an avenue running through parkland or over adjacent estate land. From the late 1730s, however, the most fashionable houses began to be provided with more extensive suites of entertaining rooms, which were arranged on a circuit, an arrangement which was becoming normal by the late 1750s, especially in new-built mansions, and in the smaller 'villas' erected by the wealthy and fashionable on the outskirts of great cities. When the house was used for entertaining, guests could drift easily from one room to the next, alternately taking tea, playing cards and dancing, an arrangement better suited to the new forms of easy, affable forms of social engagement associated with the 'polite'.³⁶

There are obvious connections between these changes in domestic planning and the new form of landscape design which was emerging through the 1750s and '60s. As domestic plans organised around linear axes fell from favour, so too did axial avenues, symmetry and linear vistas in the surrounding grounds. Instead, the circuit plan of the house was now replicated outside. In the words of the historian Mark Girouard:

The surroundings of ... houses were reorganised in much the same way as the interiors, and for similar reasons ... Guests or visitors, having done the circuit of the rooms, did the circuit of the grounds. Just as, at a big assembly, tea was served in one room and cards laid out in another, the exterior circuit could be varied by stopping at a temple to take tea, or at a rotunda to scan the view through a telescope.³⁷

The proliferation of rides and drives facilitated the use of the park in these kinds of ways, allowing groups of guests to travel with ease through the park, to the various places of resort within it.

There may have been a gender element in all this, for the rise of 'polite society' was associated with changes in the relationship between men and women, and with a greater emphasis on what has been called 'companionate marriage', in which the importance of friendship, affection and respect between husband and wife were

increasingly emphasised, shaping choice of marriage partners. Earlier deer parks had essentially been areas for male rather than female recreation. Hunting deer, while never exclusively an activity undertaken by men, was predominantly associated with them.³⁸ So, too, was the practise of fast riding across the open parkland, for although upper-class women did regularly ride, modesty and mode of dress tended to ensure that this was in a manner—usually side saddle, with both legs on the same side of the horse—which reduced the speed at which they could move across rough ground. The gravel drives, turf rides and smooth contours of Brown's parks ensured that they could be enjoyed in equal measure by both sexes, and all ages, in carriages, if not on horseback.

The rise of the landscape style was thus related both to changes in social relations and to the developments in the disposition of domestic space which arose from these. But there were other links between the design of houses, and that of their grounds. Brown's earlier landscapes had accompanied houses built in 'Palladian' style, the refined form of classicism which became fashionable from the late 1710s, and which was based on the work of Inigo Jones (1573-1652) and, in particular, on the designs of the sixteenth-century Italian Andrea Palladio.³⁹ The latter had modelled his buildings on what was then known about the architecture of classical antiquity, which in truth was not a lot. Palladio's designs for country villas were thus based, not on the *houses* of the ancients, but on their temples. As the antiquarian Allan Ramsay observed in 1762: 'The present taste in architecture was formed, not upon the palaces and dwelling-houses of the ancient Greeks and Romans, of which there were no vestiges at the revival of the arts, but upon their temples and other buildings, from which the ornamental part has been borrowed and applied to domestic use, in a manner abundantly absurd, for the most part ... which, nevertheless, custom has rendered agreeable to the sight'.⁴⁰ His comments reflect the fact that in the middle decades of the eighteenth century a more accurate knowledge of classical art and architecture began to be disseminated across western Europe, as a result of excavations at places like Herculaneum and Pompeii, and as a consequence of archaeological expeditions to Greece.⁴¹ British architects like Nicholas Revett and, in particular, Robert Adam were swept along with this new enthusiasm for classical civilisation, and Adam in particular began to provide designs for country houses which were not merely based on Greek and Roman precedents, but which were informed by a more general taste for simplicity in form and outline which was derived from it.⁴² More importantly, 'Neoclassicism' also embraced aspects of interior design. It became apparent, from excavations at Herculaneum especially, that the houses of antiquity had been decorated with light, rather delicate painted schemes, featuring figures, foliage, birds and much else, and these Adam and others took as their inspiration for the remodelling of domestic interiors in England.⁴³ Neoclassical taste was soon influencing the objects placed within these spaces, from the pottery produced by Josiah Wedgewood, decorated with figures in classical dress, florets, urns and the like, to the elegant furniture of Thomas Chippendale.⁴⁴ It is important to emphasise that all these things were becoming fashionable during the 1760s, as Brown's fully developed style was emerging.

5 Benham Park near Newbury, Berkshire, viewed from the south. Built in the late 1770s, this neoclassical composition by Brown and Holland appears perfectly in harmony with its minimalist landscape. The upper floor is a nineteenth-century addition.

Brown and his business could hardly be immune from this significant shift in taste. The early houses supplied by his business were in Palladian style, but by the late 1760s, at Claremont, he and Henry Holland were producing designs which were more Neoclassical than Palladian in inspiration, and by the 1770s their designs for places like Benham Park (Berkshire) or Berrington (Herefordshire) were entirely Neoclassical. Many of Brown's landscapes, moreover, were created at precisely the same time as their associated country houses were being built or remodelled by Robert Adam or other Neoclassical architects. The simplicity, almost minimalism, of Brown's compositions from the early 1760s echoed the principals of the new architecture, with their emphasis on planes and on distinct, continuous outlines. A landscape designed by Brown made a perfect setting for a Neoclassical house (figure 5). More than this: Brown's designs mirrored the very ideas and concepts underlying the new architecture, the emphasis of Adam and others on the simple and the 'pure', the rejection of 'superfluous ornament' and above all the belief that architectural forms were to be derived from nature's beauties, distilled through observation and abstraction. To Brown, creating landscapes was not a matter 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.⁴⁵

Yet Neoclassicism was not simply a matter of harking back to antiquity. Those providing houses, schemes of interior decoration or consumer goods in the new style evidently believed that the forms of ancient Greece and Rome were to be improved upon, not just slavishly copied, in this age of science and industry.⁴⁶ Right across Europe the new taste was closely allied with the spirit of the Enlightenment, and in England too it was broadly aligned with the enthusiasm for improvement and modernisation which was widely shared by the people who commissioned Brown, or his fellow designers, to transform their grounds.⁴⁷

And this, perhaps, is the last point we need to note about Brown's landscapes: the way in which they reflected other forms of modernity in the landscape, concentrating and representing 'improvements' more widely adopted

at a domestic level. Two examples from many might be used to demonstrate this point. I noted earlier the importance in England's economic expansion of the new canal network, but 'navigations' were only one aspect of a wider interest in water management in the eighteenth century. Not only were the first factories powered by water power, necessitating the construction of mill ponds and often very complex systems of leats, but the control of water was also of vital importance in the improvement of agriculture. The middle and later decades of the eighteenth century saw the spread across England of new methods of systematic field drainage, a major contributor to the rise in crop yields which occurred at this time.⁴⁸ There were, moreover, new concerns about the effects of damp conditions on human health on the part of the social elite—a desire to escape the deleterious effects of 'miasmas'—so that some country houses were rebuilt on new, more elevated sites, leaving behind the moats and fish ponds which had formerly been indispensable adjuncts to a mansion.⁴⁹ Brown's lakes, and his complex land drainage schemes, aimed at creating a dry setting for the house, but giving distant views of controlled, engineered water, should be read as part of this wider interest in water and its management. In many contexts lake-making was a way of dealing with areas of damp, marshy ground which could not be effectively drained. Lord Dacre described in 1759 how Brown's proposed lake within the park at Belhus in Essex would be

A very great ornament to that side of the Park and quite change the Face of it. By what I have said you will immediately conceive that all the rushy part of Bumstead Mead will be converted into water, and that the Black moory soil will be taken away till we come to the parts of the meadow that rise and where the soil is gravel.⁵⁰

The improvement of the nation's roads, through turnpike trusts and a variety of innovations in construction, was another key element in economic expansion which had connections with Brown's style of landscaping. 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 roads improved there were significant developments in the design of carriages. The better opportunities for travel saw a range of technical innovations, especially in better forms of suspension. They also witnessed the development, through the 1750s and '60s, 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 as a pleasurable activity. The drives and rides in Brown's parks thus reflected new attitudes towards travel in horse-drawn vehicles, and the new forms of such vehicles which were now available to the rich and fashionable. If these improvements in transport had not occurred, it is hard to believe that Brown's serpentine drives—and the way in which his landscapes were designed around them—would have become so popular with his clients.

What has all this got to do with the local historian? The answer is, 'a great deal'. First, the parks created by Brown and his contemporaries constituted one important element of the spatial framework within which local societies operated in the eighteenth century, serving to channel patterns of social contact and interaction. The role of landscapes in structuring social relationships was emphasised long ago by W.G. Hoskins in such books as *Fieldwork in Local History* but in recent decades it has been a subject given more attention by theoretical archaeologists than by local historians.⁵³ Parks were, in one sense, socially exclusive landscapes, but we need to know far more about who precisely was admitted to them, and who was excluded, and in what contexts. In the late eighteenth century a minor poet in Bedale, Yorkshire, recounted 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 new 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 mood⁵⁴

We thus have some information about the attitudes to and experiences of ordinary people to these landscapes, but we need much more.

At a more basic level local historians, with their intimate knowledge of local archives and local families, are often able to examine, more critically than others, the veracity of claims that Brown worked at particular places. Even in the eighteenth century, it seems, some wealthy individuals were asserting that Brown designed landscapes which he had never in fact visited, and some of these erroneous attributions are still widely repeated. Conversely, there is no doubt that some of Brown's commissions still await discovery. Only one of his account books survives, listing

a mere nineteen commissions which were begun in the early 1760s, while his bank accounts (which exist for his entire career) omit many of the places he is known to have been employed, payment having presumably been made to him in other ways.⁵⁵ Local historians, especially those working on the history of particular landed estates, should always be on the look-out for his name (or that of his principal associates) in the accounts.⁵⁶ But, while undiscovered commission doubtless still exist, there is no doubt that the vast majority of landscape parks created in England in the second half of the eighteenth century were in fact the work of other designers, and it is these which we really need to know more about. Some, as noted, worked on a national scale—men like Nathaniel Richmond or Richard Woods—but most were local practitioners, typically land surveyors or nurserymen, who often advertised in the local newspapers. Just as men like Richmond had earlier worked with Brown, such men had often worked with one of his less famous contemporaries, a fact they were keen to emphasise: Samuel Gooch, for example, announced in the *Norwich Mercury* in February 1764 that he was ‘now arrived from London’ and settled in Norwich with an intention to undertake ‘New Work in all its Branches’.

Any Gentleman that please to make Trial will find their Work faithfully executed in the neatest Manner by ... the above, many Years Foreman to the eminent Richard Woods, Land Surveyor and Designer of New Work⁵⁷

These men, part of the rapidly expanding industry of provincial gardeners, improvers, builders and architects, are in some senses as important as Brown and his company, for they were responsible for the vast majority of designed landscapes in eighteenth-century England. We urgently need to know far more about them and their business practices. Brown was a businessman of genius and a designer of astonishing subtlety and perception, and his landscape can still inspire a remarkable range of sensations and emotions. But many of these obscure individuals were also designers of real ability, and it is time they emerged from his shadow.

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