

A Legacy in Landscape: the Aesthetic Minimalism of Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown

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This year, 2016, marks the 300th anniversary of the birth of Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown (1716 – 83), the iconic landscape designer who created what we know today as being the English country garden. His name has become inseparable from eighteenth-century landscape history, and surely there is no more suitable a setting in which to celebrate Brown’s tercentenary than at the Sharpham-Dartington symposium, *Language, Landscape and the Sublime*.¹ With its sweeping views across the River Dart, the landscape Brown embellished at Sharpham House occupies one of the most coveted sites on the Devon coastline.² Such lasting visions of an idealized Britain continue to inform our response to the natural landscape. Indeed they constitute, in the famous words of the architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner, ‘England’s greatest contribution to the visual arts’.³

Expansive parks like Sharpham’s represented a seismic shift in taste from the axial geometry of the seventeenth-century formal garden, to the perfecting of the ‘natural’ pastoral landscape. Therefore, in keeping with the centennial celebrations, this paper is an opportunity to reflect on Brown’s achievements in shaping the eighteenth-century countryside. A ruthless businessman as well as an aesthetic genius, this article does not, however, examine Brown’s practical skills, but instead concentrates on how his singular vision for rural Britain became so successful it superseded anything that had come before it, realizing a green and pleasant land.

Beginning with an exploration of how the language of taste weaved its way through

¹ A version of this paper was originally presented as one of the keynote lectures at the symposium, which was held on 29 – 30 June 2016.

² Jane Brown, *The Omnipotent Magician, Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown 1716 – 83* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2011), p. 176.

³ Nikolaus Pevsner, ‘The Genesis of the Picturesque’, *Architectural Review* 196 (November 1944), p. 139.

the design revolutions of the eighteenth century, from the contrived, classically laced Arcadian layouts to the eclecticisms of the mid-century Rococo garden, this paper culminates with the landscape minimalism of Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown.

Brown’s pared-back park formula held the commercial monopoly on landscape design for well over a hundred years, and even today, his rolling lawns, scattered with tree clumps and ornamented with glittering lakes, continue to define our perception of rural Britain. Both a visionary and a practical plants man, the scale of his work is extraordinary, and in 2016 the number of landscapes attributed to him continues to rise. Careful mapping plots the distribution of the 267 sites already credited to Brown by English Heritage back in 2013.⁴ As a result, putting together this paper felt more daunting than usual. It is as if, with the spotlight turned firmly on the great landscape designer, the pressure on each of us to somehow ‘do Brown justice’ increases.

It is no secret, then, that when it comes to the history of landscape, Brown’s is *the* household name. In the county of Devon alone, he has been linked to at least five different sites: two of them – Sharpham House and Escot – are currently attributions only, but the remaining three – Mamhead House, Widdicombe and Ugbrooke House – were definite, dated projects. To most people, therefore, the phrase ‘English landscape garden’ conjures up an image of a Brownian layout similar to the iconic view of the house, lake and lawns at Bowood in Wiltshire. This is because Brown the man has become almost entirely synonymous with the landscapes he helped to shape. One of the reasons behind this conflation is due to the fact that we know so very little about him, his character, or what he looked like. Even his exact date of birth is unknown, the only certainty being that he was baptised on 30 August 1716 in

⁴ John Gregory, Sarah Spooner, Tom Williamson, *Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown: A Research Impact Review Prepared for English Heritage by The Landscape Group, University of East Anglia*, Research Report Series no. 50, English Heritage (2013), p. 84.

Kirkharle, Northumberland, as the fifth child of Ursula and William Brown, a yeoman-farmer.⁵ The lowliness of Brown's origins is often exaggerated in order to aggrandize further his successes as a landscape gardener, but the truth of the matter was that his brother John was considered sufficiently well-born to marry Jane Lorraine, the daughter of Lancelot's first employer.⁶

The number of mysteries surrounding aspects of Brown's life was confirmed to the author personally in 2012, when the charity Sustrans wrote requiring confirmation of Brown's height. They were designing a bench flanked with three, pierced silhouette, full height portraits of figures relevant to the locality. These portrait sculptures were made with the same material as the Angel of the North, and are now permanent installations, sited along the new cyclepath from Luton to Harpenden, called the Upper Lea Valley. This route runs alongside Luton Hoo, one of Brown's Bedfordshire commissions, and the team had resorted to morphing Brown's face onto the body of an eighteenth-century gentleman, there being no known full length portraits of the landscape designer to reference. This bizarre conflation was eventually built, flanked to one side by a sculpture of Eric Morecambe, who lived in Harpenden, and on the other, a female sea scout, who frequently sailed on Brown's lakes. The face used is at least accurate, as it came from the first of only two known portraits of Brown, the one painted by Nathaniel Dance c. 1773 and which now hangs in the National Portrait Gallery. It shows a much more severe and formally groomed gardener than Richard Cosway captured in his later portrait, held in a private collection.

Educated until he was sixteen, in 1732 Brown embarked on his first job as an apprentice under-gardener at Kirkharle Hall. There, he grappled with tree planting and

⁵ For more on Brown's early life, see Laura Mayer, *Capability Brown and the English Landscape Garden* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2011).

⁶ David Brown, 'Lancelot Brown and his Associates', *Garden History* 29:1 (2011), p. 5.

propagation, as well as water management and earth engineering. The speed with which he acquired this practical range of skills was noted by his self-styled successor Humphry Repton (1752 – 1818), and even by his contemporaries in the eighteenth century. Lord Chatham claimed ‘you cannot take any other advice so intelligent or more honest’⁷ than Brown’s. Certainly Brown’s relaxed, sociable nature was incredibly important, for it was what enabled his meteoric rise in society. In 1739 he left Kirkharle and headed south, catching the eye of the formidable Viscount Cobham, the owner of a vast estate at Stowe, in Buckinghamshire. Cobham was so pleased with the Elysian Fields Brown laid out there, that in 1742 he promoted him to Head Gardener, granting him a comfortable enough income on which to marry, but more importantly giving him access to an extensive circle of prospective patrons, with whom he began to be very much in demand.

In 1751 Brown struck out alone, taking his growing family to Hammersmith, London’s market garden area, and setting himself up there, in his own words, as a ‘place-maker’. This move marked the beginning of an outstanding – if relentlessly demanding – career, culminating in his famous appointment as Royal Gardener to George III. Such was his relationship with his clients, that when he died, Lord Exeter hung a copy of the Dance portrait in Burghley House, and Lord Coventry built a memorial to Brown within his landscape at Croome Park, in Worcestershire⁸. The inscription on it reads Brown, ‘Who by the powers of his Indomitable and creative Genius formed this garden scene Out of a morass’.

By instigating his most ‘natural’ style, Brown was reacting against the artificiality of the formal, man-made gardens which had come before by stripping an essentially Arcadian tradition back to its bare bones. As Hannah says to Bernard in

⁷ Quoted in Dorothy Stroud, *Capability Brown* (London: Faber and Faber, second edn. 1975), p. 186.

⁸ J. Brown, *The Omnipotent Magician*, p. 4.

Tom Stoppard's famous play *Arcadia*: 'English landscape was invented by gardeners imitating foreign painters who were evoking classical authors. The whole thing was brought home in the luggage from the Grand Tour. Here, look - Capability Brown doing Claude, who was doing Virgil. Arcadia!'⁹ Certainly a number of the basic elements of the English landscape style were indisputable features of parks pre-dating Brown. Most notably in the layouts of the gentleman-architect Sanderson Miller (1716 – 80), or the painter and designer William Kent (1685 – 1748), but they can be traced back even before them to the medieval deer park. It was not to be either a smooth, or an easy transition, from the formal Franco-Dutch gardens of the seventeenth century to the trademark minimalist style for which Brown is now famous. As Jane Brown concludes in her recent biography:

Lancelot Brown changed the face of eighteenth century England, designing country estates and mansions, moving hills and making flowing lakes and serpentine rivers, a magical world of green. The English landscape style spread across Europe and the world [...] It proved so pleasing that Brown's influence moved into the lowland landscape at large and into landscape painting.¹⁰

The Roman maxim 'there's no accounting for taste' was perhaps never more relevant than to the eighteenth century, when the notion became something of a cultural obsession. The poet Alexander Pope defined a country estate such as Sharpham's as being an architectural and horticultural composition; a world in which the man of taste reveled. The language of taste therefore weaved its way through the design revolutions of the eighteenth-century English garden, restructuring social hierarchies and re-writing the landscape.¹¹ For the Georgian gentry, the idea of good and bad taste shaped decisions on everything, from dress to decor, architectural

⁹ Tom Stoppard, *Arcadia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 40.

¹⁰ J. Brown, *The Omnipotent Magician*, front book-jacket.

¹¹ Melvyn Bragg and guests, 'Taste', *In Our Time*, BBC Radio 4, program first aired on 25 October 2007.

framework to furniture, and landscape to literature. Indeed, the eighteenth century witnessed an explosion in the taste industries, with the origins of Chippendale furniture, Wedgwood pottery, the founding of Christie's auction house and a corresponding glut of publications devoted to the new aesthetic, moral and social guidelines.¹² In the mid-eighteenth century, the social commentator George Coleman wrote:

Taste is at present the darling idol of the polite world [...] The fine ladies and gentleman dress with Taste; the architects, whether Gothic or Chinese, build with Taste; the painters paint with Taste; critics read with taste; and in short, fiddlers, players, singers, dancers, and mechanics themselves, are all the sons and daughters of Taste. Yet in this amazing super-abundance of Taste, few can say what it really is, or what the word itself signifies.¹³

In terms of the landscape garden, the rise to prominence of the Brownian park has long been a central theme in garden history. Horace Walpole's *History of the Modern Taste in Gardening*, published in 1782, established the basis for much of the narrative which now underpins popular understandings of eighteenth-century garden design¹⁴. Walpole sought to demonstrate that the natural style of William Kent, who was 'succeeded by a very able master' in Brown, would become the national style of England, at the expense of enclosed formal gardens. Most of the major works on garden history produced up until 1980 consequently viewed the development of a natural style purely in terms of garden design, with Brown's works seen as the culmination of a shift in trend.¹⁵ Only in recent years has Brown's preeminence been questioned; his imitators and followers viewed as garden designers in their own

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Quoted in *ibid.*

¹⁴ Gregory, Spooner, Williamson, *Research Impact Review*, p. 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

right.¹⁶ Current thinking links the shift within landscape aesthetics to political ideas, the spread of enclosure and the reclamation of common land, or even with the changing ground plans of Georgian houses, where rooms began to be arranged in a looser, more informal circuit.¹⁷ All of these theories have merit. It certainly makes sense that a deviation in building style from the formal, straight parade rooms of the seventeenth-century manor house encouraged the dissolution of the strait formal axis within its corresponding landscape. Increasingly informal social encounters called for flexible environments, both indoors and out. Consequently, Mark Girouard argues:

Axial planning, and straight avenues, canals or walks all converging on the ceremonial spine of the house disappeared in favour of circular planning. A basically circular layout was enlivened by different happenings all the way round the circuit, in the form of temples, obelisks, seats, pagodas, rotundas and so on.¹⁸

According to Walpole, it was famously Kent who appeared, ‘bold and opinionative enough to dare and dictate, and born with a genius to strike out a great system from the twilight of imperfect essays. He leaped the fence, and saw that all nature was a garden’.¹⁹ Thus Kent ushered in the demise of clipped and walled, Franco-Dutch designs. He had returned enlightened, like all young men of taste, from his Grand Tour of the Continent and pioneered a transitional gardening trend: that of the Arcadian landscape. At gardens such as Chiswick’s, in London, Kent sited classical temples within a semi-formal wilderness. These Arcadian layouts were highly contrived and brimming with intellectual references to the classics. Chiswick’s Ionic Temple, for example, was circular in form, imitating the Roman Pantheon, the

¹⁶ David Jacques, *Georgian Gardens, the Reign of Nature* (London: Batsford Ltd., 1983), pp. 113 – 21.

¹⁷ Gregory, Spooner, Williamson, *Research Impact Review*, p. 26.

¹⁸ Mark Girouard, *Life in the English Country House: a Social and Architectural History* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 210.

¹⁹ Horace Walpole, *The History of the Modern Taste in Gardening* (facsimile edition based on the 1782 edition of the text, ed. John Dixon Hunt, 1995), p. 43.

portico derived from the Temple of Portunus in the Forum.

Soon the taste for both interior and exterior classical features escalated, as the upper classes rushed to assert their cultural authority and wealth. Vast garden buildings such as Sir John Vanbrugh's imposing Temple of the Four Winds at Castle Howard, in Yorkshire, were built, this one based on the Casino at Villa Ludovisi in Rome. As England was deliberately modeling itself on the Augustan values of Horace and Virgil, it is no surprise that the advent of Brown's informal landscape style was similarly based on a classical precedent. Robert Castell's seminal book, *The Villa's of the Ancients Illustrated* of 1728, argued that Pliny the Younger's informal garden at Tuscum was 'thrown into such an agreeable Disorder, as to have pleased the Eye from several Views, like so many beautiful Landskips; and at the same time have afforded at least all the Pleasure that could be enjoy'd in the most regular Gardens'.²⁰ Taking Pliny's garden as precedent, Kent thereafter transformed estates such as Stowe, Esher and Rousham into landscapes recreating the supposed pastoral bliss of ancient Rome. The taste for axial formalism had been irreversibly replaced by opening vistas and scatterings of temples, statues and urns, and when Brown arrived at Stowe, it was to work under the guidance of Kent.

In short, the Georgian gentleman could 'read' the contrived view of the Arcadian landscape, and appreciate its allusions to art, literature and contemporary culture.²¹ For example, one interpretation of the landscape at Stourhead, in Wiltshire, is that the owner Henry Hoare recreated Aeneas's quest to found Rome, as depicted in the paintings by Claude Lorrain. Hoare believed explicitly that taste was a birthright and his Temple of Flora, with its gloriously elitist inscription '*Procul O Procul Este*

²⁰ Robert Castell, *The Villas of the Ancients Illustrated* (1982 facsimile edition), p. 117.

²¹ Mayer, *Brown and the English Landscape Garden*, p. 26.

Profane (Begone, you who are uninitiated, begone)', articulates this beautifully.²² But how did a deliberate, conscious acquisition of taste fit in with classical notions of decorum and the prescribed limits of appropriate social behavior? This painting of the Thames shows the many different building styles which were crammed along the water's edge, including Pope's Palladian villa. By the mid-century, new houses and gardens sprang up almost every day, decorated with mismatched classical porticoes and Chinese dragon-statues, and a hotchpotch of Gothic and Venetian windows. They were the objects of constant ridicule to those who perceived themselves to be true arbiters of taste, and satires like *The Citizen's Country Box*, published in 1756, slandered the 'monstrous impertinence' and 'tasteless glitter' of those seen to be acting above their station.²³

Rococo gardens like Painswick, in Gloucestershire, were crammed with artifice and exoticism, and Chinese pavilions, like the one at Shugborough Hall in Staffordshire, sprang up all over the country as trade routes to the East enabled connections to be made between oriental asymmetric gardens and the emerging English landscape style. Into this suffocating stylistic free-for-all came Brown, cannily courting royalty and members of the aristocracy with his new, deceptively simplistic ideas, and encouraging a dialogue between himself as entrepreneur and his valued clients. For Brown exploited that desire of the landowning classes to remodel their estates in the taste *du jour*, particularly if that transformation reflected the political, intellectual, practical and aesthetic advances of the century.

²² Timothy Mowl, *Gentlemen & Players: Gardeners of the English Landscape* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2000), p. 145.

²³ Bragg, *In Our Time*.

Brown himself wrote that his style evolved explicitly from ‘all the elegance and all the comforts which Mankind wants in the Country’.²⁴ He designed his landscapes not just to provide for the agricultural, sporting and leisure needs of the Georgian gentry, but also to appear effortless and graceful. Accordingly, estates such as Berrington Hall in Herefordshire were stripped back to their basic forms: river-like lakes and open expanses of turf, a scattering of trees and a surrounding belt of forest. This was a deliberate attempt to replicate and perfect nature, and lead his obituary to predict that ‘where [Brown] is the happiest man he will be least remembered, so closely did he copy nature that his works will be mistaken’²⁵ for it.

It is a well known anecdote that Brown came about his nickname ‘Capability’ because of his tendency to assess an estate’s ‘capabilities’ from horseback, during an initial site visit. This is explained in an article published in the *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser* in 1776:

He [Brown] obtained his name of *Capability Brown*, from the answer he made to Lord Coventry; when having been shewn the place to which much had been done before, his Lordship asked him how he liked it? *Why, my Lord, the place has its capabilities.* He did much to it himself, and esteems it his best performance.²⁶

Certainly the term ‘capabilities’ with reference to Brown was in general use by 1770 when the newspapers disseminated the term, referring to ‘Mr. Brown, the engineer, commonly called Capability Brown’ with regard to ‘the new modeling St. James’s Park’.²⁷ However, in his most recent article in *Garden History*, Michael Cousins has

²⁴ This quotation comes from the famous passage in which Brown explains his own approach to landscape, first quoted by Stroud in *Capability Brown* (London: Faber and Faber, first edn. 1950), p. 156.

²⁵ www.capabilitybrown.org.

²⁶ *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser*, 1174 (30 July 1776).

²⁷ *London Evening Post*, 6680 (4 – 6 September 1770).

cited perhaps the earliest ever recorded reference to the nickname.²⁸ This was used on 27 August 1758 when Lord Royston wrote to his father about Brown's forthcoming work at Wrest:

I am sorry We are not like to have the happiness of seeing your Lordship & Lady Hardwicke here this Summer, I hope, there will be more Temptation the next, when Mr. Brown will have shewn the Capabilities of the Place.²⁹

When Brown came across an outdated, formal layout such as Wrest's, wherever possible he dismantled and streamlined it. This was certainly the case at Prior Park in Bath, where he removed the fussy Rococo features and preserved only the lake and Palladian Bridge.³⁰ He also disliked arable fields, unsightly farm buildings and walled kitchen gardens, hiding them behind screens of trees. At Dodington Park in Gloucestershire, now owned by Sir James Dyson, Sir William Codrington first paid Brown £1368 to transform his outmoded gardens into a fashionable landscape park.³¹ James Maule recorded the completed project in a survey of 1770.³² This plan clearly illustrates how Brown wound a serpentine drive between two vast lakes before planting his customary tree clumps. However, the map reveals that despite this naturalizing, Brown failed to persuade Codrington to take down his old-fashioned walled gardens and straight formal canals. He resorted instead to hiding them from the drive with carefully sited shrubs. Much of a good plan, justified Brown, depended not just on 'the trees and the colour of their leaves to produce the

²⁸ Michael Cousins, 'The Not-so-Capable Mr. Brown? Hewell Grange, Worcestershire', *Garden History* 44:1 (2016), pp. 51 – 73.

²⁹ BL, Add. 35352, f. 40.

³⁰ For more on the significance of this bridge and why Brown might have kept it, see Mikolaj Getka-Kenig, 'The Palladian Bridge Revisited: the Imperial Ideology of Classicism and the Architectural Replication of a Garden Pavilion', *Garden History* 44:1 (2016), pp. 90 – 104.

³¹ See Mowl, *The Historic Gardens of England: Gloucestershire* (Stroud: Tempus, 2002), pp. 97 – 102 for a complete narrative on Dodington Park, which included the introduction of William Emes.

³² Gloucester Record Office: D1610/P18.

effect of light and shade so very essential [...] as also the hiding what is disagreeable and showing what is beautiful'.³³

Brown's use of planting was unique. He combined open pasture with perimeter shelter-belts to denote legal and visual boundaries, and used screens of trees to disguise and reveal as necessary. In order that his designs might be appreciated during his patrons' lifetimes, he even transplanted mature specimens from other parts of a park with a horse-drawn carriage. His preference was for indigenous trees, such as oak, elm and beech. This choice of planting has been interpreted by some, most recently John Phibbs, as a deliberate attempt to create a specifically English – and more to the point, a definitively un-French – style of gardening.³⁴ The truth is, however, much less patriotic. Brown and his contemporaries did use exotics, including the cedar of Lebanon (this perhaps most famously at Highclere Castle in Berkshire, now immortalized by the opening credits of ITV's television series *Downton Abbey*) and American plane, and even conifers, like those planted at Kimberley in Norfolk, as specimen trees. Jane Brown christened the cedar Brown's 'signature tree'.³⁵ Unfortunately what has happened is that the shorter life span of many of these exotic species has accentuated the indigenous 'natural' character of the planting, in much the same way as Stourhead is now famous only for the elitist, classical views discussed previously, the surviving stone temples having long outlived their flimsy Rococo counterparts.

Brown is frequently criticized for removing all formal gardens, terraces and parterres from the vicinity of a house, replacing them with bare lawns separated from the grazed park only by a sunken fence known as a 'haha'. This trait led his

³³ Stroud, *Capability Brown* (1950), p. 156.

³⁴ John Phibbs, 'The Englishness of Lancelot Capability Brown', *Garden History* 31:2 (2003), pp. 122 – 40.

³⁵ J. Brown, *The Omnipotent Magician*, p. 79.

successor Humphry Repton to grumble that ‘there is no part of Mr Brown’s system which I have had more difficulty in correcting than the absurd fashion of bringing cattle to the windows of a house. It is called natural, but to me it has ever appeared unnatural that a palace should rise immediately out of a sheep pasture’.³⁶ Repton’s Red Book for Wimpole Hall in Cambridgeshire is meticulously illustrated with his customary ‘before and after’ designs, showing how he intended to reinstate a formal park paling between the pleasure grounds and Brown’s newly extended parkland. Brown did not remove all formal planting from his schemes, however, as often this had not long reached maturity on his arrival, leaving his clients reluctant to cut it down. Hence Wimpole Hall’s South Avenue, planted in 1720, was retained in full.

On other occasions, Brown and his men saved parts of an avenue to recycle within a more informal planting scheme. For example at Wimpole, the North Avenue was broken up into loose clumps. Both avenues are depicted in Leonard Knyff and Jan Kip’s bird’s eye view of 1707, recording the formal gardens originally laid out at Wimpole by the acclaimed designers George London and Henry Wise.³⁷ Stiff and geometric, with vast parterres, statuary and box hedging; gardens like these represented everything Brown stood against. Brown’s plan for Wimpole, ‘Design for the lakes and the northern extension of the Park’, was dated, like a true work-a-holic, Christmas 1767.³⁸ From it we can see how he tore down field boundaries and fences, laying the whole area smoothly to grass and naturalizing two square ponds into a chain of serpentine pools. The end result, complete with a Gothic Folly, was so magical that Jemima Grey enthused:

³⁶ Humphry Repton, *Wimpole Hall Red Book*, 1801, held at the house (National Trust, WIM/D/485a).

³⁷ For both this illustration and a complete history of the Wimpole estate, see Mowl and Mayer, *The Historic Gardens of England: Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely* (Bristol: Redcliffe Press, 2013), pp. 21 – 39.

³⁸ National Trust, WIM/D/448.

Mr. Brown has been leading me such a Circle, & his Magic Wand has raised such landscapes to the Eye – not visionary for they were all there but his Touch has brought them out with the same Effect as a Painter’s Pencil upon canvass that after having hobbled over rough Ground to Points that I had never seen before, for two Hours, I return half Tired, & half Foot sore, & really must break off, it being just Dinner-time & post time.³⁹

Of course, this confident formula of rippling lawns, sheets of water and casual planting did not emerge fully formed at the start of Brown’s career, but rather evolved slowly and organically. His early landscapes, like Croome, or Chillington in Staffordshire, were rooted firmly in that Arcadian tradition of the first part of the century. Croome’s circuit was very much enclosed and inward-looking, with busy ornamental features including this grotto arranged around a lakeside walk. Chillington’s was a similarly contrived design, stacked full of garden buildings and fussy features to rival Kent’s Arcadian vision.

Nevertheless, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, the aesthetic qualities with which we so strongly associate Brown were fully recognizable, as this description of Fisherwick in Staffordshire, written by an unnamed visitor in 1800, proves:

The still serenity of this beautiful lake heightened by the solumn umbrage of majestic trees on either side, terminated by a light elegant bridge, and backed by a thick wood, intirely excluding all other objects, [it] has the most sublime effect [...] The harmony of the whole diffuses a congenial calm over the imagination, and whilst we gaze with rapture, every passion subsides into a most pleasing serenity.⁴⁰

³⁹ Bedfordshire Record Office: 9a/9, p. 125.

⁴⁰ Anon., *A Companion to the Leasowes, Hagley and Enville, with a Sketch of Fisherwick* (Birmingham: 1800), pp. 120 – 1.

So there the enduring characteristics of the Brownian aesthetic were laid out by an anonymous garden tourist: rolling lawns, sinuous lakes, shady woodland and artlessly scattered clumps of trees.

Unlike his successor Humphry Repton, or the nineteenth-century designer John Claudius Loudon, Brown left few written records and no published works. There is just one solitary surviving account book in the RHS Lindley Library, and records of his Drummonds bank account. If the researcher is lucky, then an estate might have a contract, or even better, a plan, but there is virtually nothing to explain the theoretical, aesthetic or philosophical underpinnings of his designs in detail.⁴¹ Our knowledge of these things comes mainly from the letter which Brown wrote to Rev. Thomas Dyer in 1775, and from the philanthropist Hannah Moore's recollection of a conversation which she had with him in 1782. She tells us that Brown 'compared his art to literary composition', revealing 'Now *there* I make a comma, and there, 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'.⁴² In 1713, Pope had been advised whilst translating Homer to mould the classics into something the Georgian gentleman could identify with. It would appear Brown applied the same principle to the emerging informal landscape, adapting it to the needs of contemporary society and breaking it down into its essential components.

Too often garden historians have concentrated purely on the aesthetic reasons behind the rise of the landscape park, and discounted the practical. Yes, Brown's parks were successful because, as we have seen, they overturned the fussy outmoded gardens of the beginning of the century. But beyond stylistic considerations, Brown's landscapes took hold because they exploited the Georgian's love of hunting, shooting,

⁴¹ Gregory, Spooner, Williamson, *Research Impact Review*, p. 5.

⁴² W. Roberts and H. More, *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Mrs. Hannah More*, vol. 1 (London: 1835), p. 267.

fishing and making money. As the century progressed, guns became shorter, lighter and more deadly, and it just so happened that Brown's copses were the perfect roosting ground for pheasants, providing the landed gentry with constantly moving targets.⁴³ In 1787, when John Byng visited Brown's landscape at Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire, he noted that here were 'hatched and reared such quantities of pheasants that I almost trod upon them in the grass'.⁴⁴

In an age of fast carriages, another recreational, but much less violent, use for Brown's parks was the circuit drive, highly prized for its ability to impress guests. Brown's 1765 map of Blenheim, and the contemporary guidebook written by William Mavor in 1789, explained his changing sequence of landscape compositions to visitors in cinematic terms:

The water, the Palace, the gardens, the Grand Bride, the Pillar, Woodstock, and other remote and near objects, open and shut upon the eye like enchantment, and at one point, every change of a few paces furnishes a new scene which forms a subject worth of the sublimest pencil.⁴⁵

The term 'coached' might have been slang for motion sickness with good reason, but by the mid-century increasingly sophisticated carriages were beginning to emerge, encouraging the exploration of landscape parks and the wider countryside. Meandering on foot, dressed as a milkmaid, around dainty Rococo layouts was out – careering dangerously around a friend's landscape park was in. The politician and philosopher Edmund Burke believed that travelling in a carriage through a designed landscape was so enjoyable he compared Beauty to 'being swiftly drawn in an easy

⁴³ Mowl, *Gentlemen & Players*, p. 154.

⁴⁴ Quoted in D. Brown and Williamson, *Lancelot Brown and the Capability Men: Landscape Revolution in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2016), p. 133.

⁴⁵ Mavor, *Blenheim, A Poem*; quoted in Phibbs, 'The View Point', *Garden History* 36:2 (2008), p. 221.

coach, on a smooth turf, with gradual ascents and declivities'.⁴⁶ Likewise, Dr. Samuel Johnson, who famously published his *Dictionary* in 1755, defined happiness as 'being swiftly drawn in a chaise over undulating turf in the company of a beautiful and witty woman'.⁴⁷

For the women themselves, excursions into the countryside came to be seen as a seductive escape from the controlling environments of the country house. To them, the landscape park was a symbol of freedom. Elizabeth Percy, later 1st Duchess of Northumberland, wrote in her diary that she had a 'constant longing to enjoy my Liberty',⁴⁸ and devised a staggering list of ninety-eight different carriage drives around her Brown-designed grounds at Alnwick Castle. Although it was her husband who was later responsible for the erection of Alnwick's main Gothick garden buildings, designed and built by both Brown and Robert Adam after her death, it was the Duchess's use of the parklands that determined their position, and her love of Gothic architecture that dictated their style.

As well as pioneering a new aesthetic minimalism, Brown had come up with a landscape which facilitating the favoured pursuits of the Georgian gentry, and was, above all else, financially viable. In fact he wrote, 'I hope they will in time find out in France that Place-making, and a good English-Garden depend entirely on Principle and have very little to do with fashion; for it is a word that in my opinion disgraces Science wherever it is found'.⁴⁹ At estates like Chatsworth, in Derbyshire, Brown recycled existing features wherever possible, turning formal canals and fishponds into more fashionably shaped, naturalistic lakes. He cut winding walks between ancient

⁴⁶ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1759; facsimile edition, Scolar Press, Menston, 1970), p. 300.

⁴⁷ Quoted by Christopher Hussey in Stroud, *Capability Brown* (1950), p. 17.

⁴⁸ J. Greig (ed.) with a foreword by the Duke of Northumberland, *The Diaries of a Duchess: Extracts from the Diaries of the First Duchess of Northumberland, Elizabeth Seymour Percy 1716 - 1776* (London: Hodder and Stouton, 1926), p. 97.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Stroud, *Capability Brown* (1950), p. 156.

woodlands and transplanted individual trees from formal avenues to create scattered clumps. The army of gardeners needed to maintain a formal parterre could be replaced with grazing livestock. This was a pleasingly pastoral landscape that was also economically sensible, and in the age of Enclosure, land equaled power. The politician and writer Thomas Whateley declared that gardening was ‘no longer confined to the spots from which it borrows its name, but regulates also the disposition and embellishment of a park, a farm, or even a riding’.⁵⁰

Sharpham’s landscape, the location of the 2016 symposium, is difficult to categorise. Once a dank, Elizabethan pile, it was the majestic site overlooking the River Dart, with views down the winding estuary towards Dartmouth and the sea, that attracted the attentions of the newly rich Captain Philemon Pownoll.⁵¹ He commissioned Sir Robert Taylor to rebuild the house in the Palladian style in around 1764, but, if the landscape improvements went to Brown – which tradition and site evidence suggest they did – no payments were ever recorded. Brown’s surviving account book is for the years around 1764 when Taylor was working on the new house, but just because it contains no entries relating to Sharpham, does not mean to say that Brown had no involvement there at all. In fact, the account book fails to mention at least four other major, large-scale projects, including Temple Newsam and Petworth, which were being worked on at the time and are known to be categorically Brownian.⁵²

A full analysis of Brown’s working practice is the subject of a separate paper, but suffice to say that David Brown has concluded, through a meticulous examination of the Drummond’s bank accounts, that Brown operated a complex and flexible

⁵⁰ Thomas Whateley, *Observations on Modern Gardening* (London: 1770), p. 1.

⁵¹ Brown, *The Omnipotent Magician*, p. 176.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 163.

system of subcontracting.⁵³ By 1773, the date of both his most flamboyant signature in the accounts and the famously self-assured Dance portrait considered previously, Brown was making large and adhoc payments to men who already had, or would later develop, careers as practicing architects or landscape designers in their own right.⁵⁴ These men included Nathaniel Richmond and Adam Mickle, and Andrew Gardiner, Alexander Knox and William Ireland. In David Brown's words, the sums recorded in the accounts 'do not represent personal payments or salaries. They are more likely to represent subcontract payments covering the supply of supervision, contract labour and, in some instances, materials on a flexible *ad hoc* basis, according to the needs of the project'.⁵⁵ The result of this fluid business structure is that it is not always possible to distinguish, on the basis of the size of the bank payments, major commissions from minor ones – or as in the case of Sharpham – to trace the exact nature of his involvement at any particular site at all.

In 1753, the first year of Brown's account at Drummonds, his recorded receipts totalled £4,924; by 1768 this had risen to a staggering £32,279.⁵⁶ As Tom Williamson has concluded: 'The development of this sophisticated business structure reflects the increasing commercialization of all aspects of society at this time, something which was also manifest in the shift in the character of garden designer from gentleman amateur or dependent client, to professional practitioner'.⁵⁷ Brown was undoubtedly the most successful eighteenth-century landscape gardener in terms of artistic, and financial, terms, yet it was his vast network of associates who enabled him to wrack up the hundreds of commissions for which he is now credited. This

⁵³ D. Brown, 'Lancelot Brown and his Associates' but see also Peter Willis, 'Capability Brown's account with Drummonds Bank, 1753-1783', *Architectural History* 27 (1984), pp. 382 – 91.

⁵⁴ Gregory, Spooner, Williamson, *Research Impact Review*, p. 10.

⁵⁵ D. Brown, 'Lancelot Brown and his Associates', p. 4.

⁵⁶ Gregory, Spooner, Williamson, *Research Impact Review*, p. 10

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

generation of ‘natural’ landscapists worked on both new creations or, like many of Brown’s own commissions, the modification of existing parks. The result was a broad grammar of landscape style, which had seeped its way into every corner of England by the middle of the eighteenth century.

With the monopolization of the landscape park, notions of class once again came into play. After all, vast tracts of land and woodland were needed just to create one. The snobbish Repton later scoffed at newer estates where ancient trees were not readily available and fast-growing softwoods, such as larches and poplars, were planted instead. The inference being, of course, that the *nouveaux riches* who owned these estates were attempting to secure taste, establishment and respectability through their landscape park, and Repton himself admitted that the chief benefit of his profession was ‘the society of those to whose notice I could not otherwise have aspired’.⁵⁸ Sure enough, as the century drew to a close, it became increasingly difficult to work out who was genuinely genteel, and who was vaguely vulgar. This confusion was something Jane Austen exploited to perfection in her novels, her characters revealing their true colors through a demonstration – or otherwise – of taste.

Hailed by his contemporaries as immortal before he was fifty, by the 1770s Brown’s eminence seemed secure.⁵⁹ It is therefore tempting to assume that his signature style was only criticized after his death, with the rise of the Picturesque aesthetic, and the dawning of a new Romantic sensibility. The truth is, however, that Brown’s repetitive formula had begun to grate with garden visitors long before this. In a letter to the Viscountess Andover on 15 July 1766, at the height of Brown’s

⁵⁸ Letter from Repton to Lord Sheffield, 22 December 1805; quoted in Stephen Daniels, *Humphry Repton: Landscape Gardening and the Geography of Georgian England* (New Haven, CT, & London: The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 1999), p. 150.

⁵⁹ Mowl, *Gentlemen & Players*, p. 149.

undoubted fame, Mrs. Delany wrote in praise of her brother's exotic Rococo landscape: 'I long to have you see Calwich, and to know how you like such scenes of nature. Your *Browns*, &c, have had no business there'.⁶⁰ Similarly in 1776, Mrs. Lybbe Powys, on a visit to Hardwicke in Hampshire, expressed a view already shared by many when she wrote:

Hardwicke's merits is all its own, never has been indebted to modern improvements, and in this age may, for that reason, be thought more uncommon, as the rage for laying out grounds makes every nobleman and gentleman a copier of their neighbour, till every fine place throughout England is comparatively, at least, alike.⁶¹

Sir William Chambers, architectural tutor to George III and a founder member of the Royal Academy, wrote scathingly that in England: 'a new manner is universally adopted, in which no appearance of art is tolerated, our gardens differ very little from common fields, so closely is common nature copied in most of them; there is generally so little variety in the objects, such a poverty of imagination in the contrivance'.⁶² And it was, finally, this aesthetic monotony which attracted the vicious criticism of the Picturesque writers and the excesses of the Regency fashions, and brought the unchallenged reign of the landscape park to an end. The Picturesque theorist Uvedale Price concluded that the worst of all Brown's improvements was surely:

Smoothing and leveling the ground: the moment this mechanical common place operation (by which Mr. Brown and his followers have gained so much credit) is begun, adieu to all that the painter admires [...] in a few hours the rash hand of taste

⁶⁰ Lady Llanover, *Autobiography and Correspondence of Mary Granville, Mrs. Delany*, 3 vols., 1862, I, p.68; quoted in Mowl and Dianne Barre, *The Historic Landscapes of England: Staffordshire* (Bristol: Redcliffe, 2009), p. 163.

⁶¹ Emily J. Cleminson (ed.), *Passages from the Diaries of Mrs. Philip Lybbe Powys of Hardwicke House, Oxon. A.D. 1756 to 1808* (1899), pp. 174 – 5.

⁶² William Chambers, *A Dissertation on Oriental Gardening* (Dublin: W. Wilson, 1773), p. vii.

completely demolishes what time only, and a thousand lucky accidents, can mature, so as to become the admiration and study of a Ruysdale or a Gainsborough.⁶³

Exhausted and asthmatic, ‘Lady Nature’s Second Husband’ as Horace Walpole christened Brown,⁶⁴ collapsed in Mayfair on a winter’s night in 1783, after dining with his old patron, Lord Coventry, at Coventry House in Piccadilly. He died on 6 February at his daughter’s house in Hertford Street, and was buried in the grounds of the churchyard beside the green at Fenstanton, in Cambridgeshire. There is a notice on Hilton Green, near Fenstanton, which reads simply, ‘This tree is planted in memory of Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown, 1716 – 1783, Lord of this Manor, who planted a million others’.⁶⁵ Interred without ceremony, Brown’s legacy *is* his landscape, although it is fair to say that his overexposure in the garden history world has actually served to obscure aspects of that legacy which remain under-researched.

For example, should we now be considering anticipatory diversification of planting, to assist with the long-term survival of his landscapes? How can Brown’s parks be ‘future proofed’ against the possibility of climate change and the threat of increasing levels of tree disease?⁶⁶ To a great extent, the character of the planting adopted in restorations depends on a fuller understanding of Brown’s landscape style, and in particular on the extent to which conifers, like larch, Scots pine or spruce, were employed as design elements in their own right.⁶⁷ The use of such species would diversify planting, but it would also ensure the robustness of restored landscape parks in the face of future threats. Brown himself believed England’s open spaces must be ‘exactly fit for the owner, the Poet and the Painter. To produce these effects there

⁶³ Sir Uvedale Price, *An Essay on the Picturesque* (1794), p. 28.

⁶⁴ J. Brown, *The Omnipotent Magician*, p. 4

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 308.

⁶⁶ See Gregory, Spooner and Williamson, ‘Site Research, Field Work and Restoration’ in *Research Impact Review*, pp. 33 – 6.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

wants a good plan, good execution, a perfect knowledge of the country and the objects in it, whether natural or artificial, and infinite delicacy in the planting'.⁶⁸ This paper hopes to have shown how his seductive visions proved a potent blend of aesthetic elegance and economic viability. By stripping an estate back to just three basic forms – serpentine lakes, bare lawns and informal planting – these landscapes dominated eighteenth-century garden design completely, and have left us with an image of our natural environment which is still being marketed today.

⁶⁸ Quoted in Stroud, *Capability Brown* (1950), p. 156.