

The English Garden Views and Visitors

This year we celebrate the tercentenary of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown (*bap.* 1716, *d.* 1783), England's most famous landscape architect. Brown was an important part of a century of remarkable creativity and change in the English landscape. Major historical processes like the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions were transforming the nation's countryside through the rapid growth of turnpike roads and the enclosure of common land.

Ambitious aristocrats and landscape designers also played a crucial role. Lord Cobham at Stowe, Lord Coventry at Croome and Lord Harcourt at Nuneham Park patronised landscape designers including Charles Bridgeman, William Kent, Capability Brown and William Mason in a century that saw straight lines and formal planning give way to serpentine lakes and squiggly paths.

Drawing on the Bodleian Library's rich collection of planting plans, account books, journals, guidebooks and letters between gardeners and their clients, this display documents the creation of the English landscape by Brown and his contemporaries.

1. Blenheim account book, Oct. 1708 (MS Top Oxon c. 230, fols. 38v-39r)

Landscapes in the early eighteenth century were expensive, labour-intensive to create and elaborate in design. This account book documents the variety of payments made to contractors involved in the construction of Blenheim Palace, the home of John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough. The palace was the gift of grateful nation after Marlborough led a famous victory over Louis XIV's French troops at the Battle of Blenheim. The left-hand page shows how many elements came together to create a garden worthy of a British military hero.

Transcription

Garden & Labour & Employd in Enlarging y^e Great Lawn in y^e Woodworks, Wheelling Earth into the low Quarters of the Woodworks [,] preparing the Walks intend'd to be Gravelled by laying stone Dust and Rubbish on them. Planting out young Forrest Trees in Nurserys beds there and in the Kitchin Garden, Taking up Elms in y^e Country for the additional plantations of the North Gr^d avenue and making preparations in high parke for y^e said additional plantations, by first Taking up the Turfe, and then Opening holes & casting Good Earth to y^e place for the stools of the Trees & in Keeping the Gardens & plantations. (£156, 11s 8d)

2. The Beauties of Stow (Gough Adds Bucks 8^o 14 (5) p.22-23)

Guidebooks to country houses and their landscapes are not a recent phenomenon. Lord Cobham's gardens at Stowe were one of the most popular places to visit in the eighteenth century. This was not just a place of entertainment and relaxation but conveyed a strong political message. Cobham

commissioned the renowned architect William Kent to create a monument to great figures of Britain's past known as the Temple of British Worthies. These sixteen portrait busts, divided between figures of contemplation (including William Shakespeare) and figures of action (including King Alfred and John Hampden), held up the nation's heroic past as a way of criticising contemporary politicians.

Transcription

WILLIAM SHAKESPEAR,
Whose excellent Genius opened to him the whole Hear of Man, all the Mines of Fancy, all the Stores of Nature; and gave him Power, beyond all other Writers, to move, astonish, and delight Mankind.

3. **'An estimate for converting the nursery at Kew into a wilderness'** (MS. North b15 fol. 17r)

One of Lord Cobham's political allies was Frederick, Prince of Wales (eldest son of George II), who shared his interest in gardening in a more 'natural' style. By 1756 Prince Frederick's widow, Princess Augusta, was creating what would become the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. This invoice from the nurseryman, Robert Greening, outlines the huge number of plants required to create a new wilderness area. This included 50,000 plants and a wide range of 'Exoticks' for which he charged £50.

Transcription

An Estimate for Converting the Nursery at Kew into a Wilderness according to a Plan by Robert Greening

To Trenching the whole which is about 10 Acres at £8 an acre...£80

To taking up and planting again what is fit of the Hedge between the two fields, cutting of the Top in proper lengths for making dead hedge...£6,,10,,0

To taking up and Planting 50,000 plants which these 10 acres will require for the Quarters at 20^v a Thousand...£50

To taking up & Planting again the Exoticks from the different parts of the garden and planting other shrubs to fill up their spaces

To diging out y^e Earth ten feet wide for the walks & 6 feet on each Side to the sloped off, to Cast in the (?) them will occasion 3052 loads of Earth to be moved at 4^d. aload...50,,17,,4

To 2444 loads of Sand & Gravel at 4^d. aload diging 40,,14,,8

To Carriage of these 2444 if it can be got in the Farm which I apprehend it may at 3^d. aload...30,,11,,0

To wheeling it into place & staying at 2^d. aload...20,,7,,4

To Standard Trees of Various kinds for Shade at a Tree...

Carriage of these Standard Trees & Planting them...

To finishing & all Incident Expenses...10,,10,,0

4. **'The gardens at Kew, May 22, 1765'** (MS Eng misc. e. 522 fols 74v – 75r)

William Gilpin, the artist and theorist of the picturesque, kept copious records of his visits to memorable landscapes and gardens. Here, at Kew, he notes the newly fashionable, 'clumps' and 'serpentine walk', which had become key features of landscape design by this date. On the previous page of this notebook he also observes of the gardens at Kew, 'they were formerly laid out in the old taste; but have lately been new-modelled, enlarged & exceedingly improved'.

Transcription

The first view, upon y^e entrance, is that of y^e lawn before y^e house, which is very noble. The clumps are beautiful & very well disposed; and y^e buildings have an ~~exceeding~~ good effect.

The serpentine walk, into which you are next carried, has no fault but y^e want of variety. It might have admitted, here & there, a view upon y^e lawn.

The first opening is very fine. The bridge only is a disagreeable object...

5. **Letter from Lancelot 'Capability' Brown to George, 2nd Earl Harcourt of Nuneham Courtenay, 27th August 1778** (MS. Eng d. 3851 fol. 70 r or 70v?)

George, 2nd Earl Harcourt, was soon to employ Capability Brown on his estate Nuneham Park, five miles south of Oxford. In a letter from Lord Exeter's estate, Burghley, Brown writes to his new client lamenting the political troubles caused by the American War of Independence. He tells Earl Harcourt that 'I shall ever wish happiness to my King & Country'. Brown had been George III's Royal Gardener at Hampton Court Palace in 1764.

Transcription

My Lord

I fully intended to have had the honor of waiting on your Lordship before this time but I was prevented by two causes: one was that of illness and being with that, and Business and the addition of hot Weather totally Exhausted. The other was that I had not a man to spare at that time to have put in Execution anything we might determine. I am now at Lord Exeter's on my way to the North from Which Journey I mean to make Newnham my Road home again. This is a great Place where I have had twenty five years Pleasure in

restoring the Monument of a great Minister [verso] of a great Queen. I wish we had looked at the History of her time before we had begun so unfortunate and disgracefull a war as we have been ingaged in. I shall ever wish happiness to my King & Country and remain my Lord

Your Lordships
Most obliged & most
Obedient Ser^t
Lancelot Brown

6. **Letter from William Mason to George, 2nd Earl Harcourt, 11th July 1778**
(MS Eng d. 3842 fol8 124r)

George Harcourt, known as Viscount Nuneham until his father Simon's death in 1777, employed the poet William Mason to lay out a famous flower garden at Nuneham Park in 1771. On George's succession as 2nd Earl Harcourt, he once more called upon his friend Mason to complete the picturesque landscape that his father had started. In this letter, Mason gives us an insight into 'Capability' Brown's character observing how the Earl may need to treat him 'en grand Seigneur'. Mason believed that with his help the Earl could get the best out of Brown.

Transcription

I see Plainly by your Lordship's last that you wish me to be at Nuneham, when Brown is there, that relying on my conciliatory & soothing arts, you may have the pleasure of putting him out of humour every moment and of treating him en grand Seigneur; and yet for all that get all the good you can out of him, thro the medium of my politesse.

7. **Letter from William Whitehead to George, 2nd Earl Harcourt, summer 1781** (MS Eng. D. 3846 Fols 86 v-87r)

'Capability' Brown's improvements on nature were widely commented upon by his contemporaries. Writing to Earl Harcourt, William Whitehead includes a draft of a satirical poem in which Brown and Dame Nature compete to enhance Nuneham's beauty. A proud Brown celebrates the ways in which he has perfected and improved nature:

I have cloath'd you when naked, & when overdrest
Have stripp'd you again to your boddice, & vest;
Conceal'd every blemish, each beauty display'd,
As Reynolds would picture some exquisite Maid.

Transcription

But say, in return my adorable Dame,
To all you see here can you lay a just claim?
Who drew o'er the surface, did you, or did I,
The smooth flowing Outline that steals from the Eye?
Who thinn'd, & who group'd, and who scatter'd those trees,
Who bades the slopes fall with that delicate ease,
Who cast them in shade, & who plac'd them in light,

Who bade them divide, & who bade them unite?
 The ridges are melted, the Boundary's gone;
 Observe all these changes, & candidly own
 I have cloath'd you when naked, & when overdrest
 Have stripp'd you again to your boddice & vest,
 Conceal'd every blemish, each beauty display'd,
 As Reynolds would picture some exquisite Maid,
 Each spirited feature would happily place,
 And shed o'er the whole inexpressible grace.

One question remains up the green of yon steep
 Who through the bold walk with that elegant sweep
 There is little to see 'til the summit we gain
 Nay, never draw back, you may climb without [torn]
 And, I hope will perceive how each object is caught
 And is lost in exactly the point where it ought.
 That ground of your moulding is certainly fine
 But the swell of that knoll, & those openings are mine.
 The Prospect, Wherever beheld, must be good,
 But has ten times it's charms when you burst from this Wood.
 A wood of my planting! – The Goddess cried, hold
 'Tis grown very hot, & 'tis grown very cold.
 She fann'd, & she shudder'd, she cough'd, & she sneez'd,
 Incl'in'd to be angry, inclin'd to be pleas'd
 Half smil'd, & half pouted; - then turn'd from the view
 And dropp'd him a Curtsie, & blushing withdrew.

* - The soft undulations both distant & near
 That heave from the lawns, & yet scarcely appear.
 (So bends the ripe Harvest the breezes beneath
 As is Earth was in slumber, & gently took breath.)
 Who thinn'd etc.

8. **'William Whitehead Esq upon the Death of Lancelot Brown Esq',
 undated (probably 1783) (MS. Eng. D. 3884 fol. 64r)**

'Capability' Brown's death in 1783 was marked by an outpouring of poetical sentiment. This poem by William Whitehead not only functions as an epitaph but helps us understand Brown's position as the most famous garden designer of his day: 'Beneath his plastic hand, his keener view, / Albion, the World's fair Garden, fairer grew'.

Transcription

Clos'd are his toils, the fatal shaft has flown,
 And in Earth's bosom sleeps self-tutor'd Brown.
 Whose Eyes, quick glancing, from the Shapeless Waste
 Could call forth form, & painted as it pass'd;
 Could add fresh smiles to Nature's softest face,
 And tame her wildest beauties into grace.

Beneath his plastic hand, his keener view,
 Albion, the World's fair Garden, fairer grew.
 On half the Land he stamp'd his genuine fame,
 And Taste & Genius have inscrib'd his Name.
 For what remains, Tho' Hill, & Vale, & Shade,
 And Lawns, & Waters lend their copious aid,
 Wanting his master touch to bid them know
 Their just gradations, & their happiest glow,
 The loveliest scenes must still unfinish'd stand
 And owe their only charms to Nature's hand.

9. **Letter from George, 2nd Earl Harcourt to his wife, Elizabeth, 11th August 1788** (MS Eng. D. 3831 fol. 93r)

Lord Harcourt wrote this letter five years after the death of 'Capability' Brown. In it he praises Brown's work for Lord Coventry at Croome, which represents the 'triumph of the Gardening art and the chef d'oeuvre of his creative genius'; a fitting setting for Brown's memorial urn. Croome Court is near Cheltenham, of which Harcourt tartly remarks: 'the people of Cheltenham are the greatest cheats I have ever met with'.

Transcription

Worcester Monday

The people of Cheltenham, are the greatest cheats I ever met with, my Landlord excepted, who charged less for his Lodgings than had been agreed for.

Of the monument of the D^y; of Clarence what a bijoux it is, as in likeness that of the D^s: of Warwick...many other exquisite pieces are there also in Tewkesbury Church, of my beloved mis-named Gothic architecture, with which I was quite delighted – Croome surpassed my expectations for it has several striking natural beauties, & that part of it where the monument to Brown is placed, is the triumph of the Gardening art, and the chef d'oeuvre of his creative genius – I received a most obliging invitation to dine, which I declined, but hoped to have an opportunity if making...

10. **Extract from the travel journal of John Byng, Viscount Torrington** (MS. Eng. Misc. d. 217, fols. 251v-252r)

On Thursday 5 July 1792, John Byng visited Blenheim Palace and came face-to-face with another side to 'Capability' Brown's landscapes. 'What shock'd me much, was to hear the firing of Guns and to see a Set of Jacobins arm'd against the national Guards, the Birds'. Brown's landscapes were not just tranquil seas of green but were designed to support the new aristocratic obsession with shooting.

Transcription

What shockd me much, was to hear the firing of Guns and to see a Set of Jacobins arm'd against the national Guards, the Birds, - Oh Fye! O What for a few Cherries, Destroy all the Songsters? And here will they come to Perish.

“Stretch forth, Marlborough, thy hand of Mercy, and of Pity; and let not infamous Slaughter Prevail.”

The Old Elms, the newly planted beeches, and the (supposed – decaying) Limbs of Oaks are all Shroven; and I found that the Hews of the Hot Houses were supplied by Weeds!! – In this Garden there is not a Sufficiency of Hot House, and Pineries, by one fourth. – M^r S- being absent, I dared not pluck a Strawberry; but Strolld along The Drive, carried imperceptibly forward from Beauty, to Beauty, from View to View; fancying myself another Jaques (for I have had all his Spleen, and hatred of the World)...

11. Planting plan for Hartwell House, Buckinghamshire, 1799 (MS. Top Gen. b. 55, fol.54)

As demonstrated by Nuneham Park, the eighteenth-century landscape was not just lawns, trees and lakes; flowers played their part too. Sixteen flowerbed designs for Hartwell House survive in the Bodleian's collections. Elizabeth Harcourt, sister of 2nd Earl Harcourt married Sir William Lee of Hartwell in 1763. This pair of planting plans for the 'new Bed under parlour Windows' and the 'Bed near Door of Garden Room', demonstrate the range of flowers available to the eighteenth-century gardener and the vibrant colours of the pleasure grounds in close proximity to the house, which would have been in full bloom over the summer months when the family and their friends were in residence.

Transcription (exc. Flower names)

[left] between the Pinks round the edge small pretty low things as usual –]

[right] between the pinks Normandy Boundary Tuft & all the variety of small thins, such as ? Looking Glass, yellow Lupins & other things of the like.

12. Anonymous plan of the flower garden and Nuneham Park, 1790s (MS. D.D. Harcourt a. 1 (R))

The flower garden at Nuneham Park was one of the most celebrated layouts of the eighteenth century, designed by the poet William Mason in 1772. This later plan shows the variety of features Mason used to evoke different philosophical reflections, including figures from classical mythology such as Venus and Apollo.

13. Watercolour of a rustic temple in an anonymous sketchbook (MS. Top. Gen. g. 2, fol. 23r)

This small rustic temple nestling between a pair of fir trees is an example of the kind of ornamental building that populated late eighteenth-century landscapes. These structures served a practical as well as aesthetic purpose, often as places to take tea and refreshments during a circuit walk around the landscape. This temple, with its imaginative use of fir trees, is a long way away from the serious political statements contained in the temples at Stowe.

Transcription:

A building with rustic ornaments, the pillars to be trunks of firs with pieces of the bark strip'd off at equal distances; the frieze and pediment decorated with cones of firs and pieces of bark set square and circular.