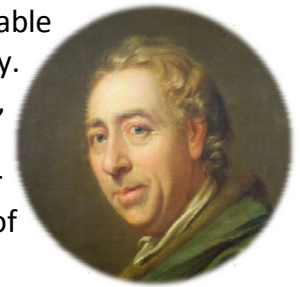


# Lancelot 'Capability' Brown (1716-1783)



was the foremost exponent of laying out estates in the fashionable naturalistic English Landscape style of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Known for his tasteful arrangement of water, trees and grass, he was primarily an Improver; draining waterlogged soils into picturesque lakes, planting trees for beauty and for commerce, bringing more land into pasture and disposing of his trees in accordance with the new pastime of game shooting.



In his lifetime, Brown improved over 250 sites, many of which have disappeared under urban development, golf courses or agriculture. In Hertfordshire 11 sites have been credited to him, shown in red on the map. He employed many eminent associates, some of whom later set up practices for themselves; men such as Nathaniel Richmond and Samuel Lidge worked in Hertfordshire. There were others working in the same style, such as Richard Woods (Brocket, near Welwyn; Newsells, near Barley), and possibly William Emes (Hamels, near Buntingford). Humphry Repton set himself up as a successor to Brown and designed many sites in the county, including Ashridge and Panshanger, which is near Cole Green.



A foreign visitor noted in 1761 that *'...English design is arranged according to modern ideas of an improvement on the beauty of Nature.'* This is deceptive. Brown and other landscape improvers screened the outside world with plantations and tree belts. Surprise views were built into the drives from the entrance lodge round the landscape. Trees, clumps, garden buildings and lakes were used to direct the viewers' gaze. Great skill, unnoticed by the casual observer, is used to create a painting of the landscape with foreground, middleground, background.



The Golden Valley, Ashridge

Much of Brown's planting has gone – his 'nurse' trees such as conifers used to protect young clumps against weather and livestock, as well as his pleasure grounds and kitchen gardens. The most noticeable loss has been his flowers. It is sometimes believed that Brown did not plant flowers, but there were shrubberies and flower gardens tucked away and delicious walks through the woods with bulbs, eglantine and wild roses. Many of his pleasure ground trees were flowering; double almonds and cherries, lilacs and laburnum (Golden Rain). Ornamental trees such as Gingko (at Cole Green), *Robinia pseudoacacia*, Cedars (at Digswell House), Purple Beech, American Red Oaks and Swamp Cypress gave seasonal interest as well as punctuation points in reading the landscape.

*"Now there",* said he [Brown], pointing his finger, *"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."*

So Brown's landscape is not only a painting, but a book to be read and enjoyed, and thus Brown's legacy survives and continues to give pleasure.



Cedar of Lebanon, The Hoo