

Hertfordshire Gardens Trust

Hertfordshire Landscape Parks – 10 Walks devised to celebrate the tercentenary of

Lancelot “Capability” Brown

Lancelot “Capability” Brown is probably the most famous figure in garden history and certainly the best known designer of Landscape Parks. “Improvement” was the watchword of landowners in the second half of the 18th century and Brown was the most successful “improver” of estates. His clients ranged from the rich Admiral Lord Anson at Moor Park to the more modest Quaker, David Barclay, at Youngsbury. With the Enclosure of common lands, estates were consolidated and enlarged, thus giving Brown the scope to incorporate huge areas into his designs.

Brown’s ability was to identify the park’s “Capabilities” by designing a naturalistic landscape out of often poor and boggy land. His formula was to plant a perimeter belt combined with irregular clumps of trees to give the impression that the estate was endless. The house, preferably sited on a hill, would stand alone and proud, unencumbered by buildings or walls, enabling commanding views over a sea of turf sweeping right up to its front door. A large serpentine ‘river’ or lake in the middle distance was the result of a huge amount of engineering to drain the park and make it more productive. Practical buildings, such as an ornamented barn at Beechwood and the Riverside Cottage at Panshanger, were designed to embellish the landscape.

Born in the small village of Kirkharle, Northumberland in 1716, from a modest background, Brown left school at the age of 16 to become a gardener at Kirkharle Hall for Sir William Lorraine. Here he learnt the technical skills of “improvement” – land drainage, clearance and tree planting.

In 1741, at the age of just 25, Brown secured the prestigious position of head gardener at Stowe – probably the most influential garden in England at the time. There he would have met William Kent, whose naturalistic ideas must have influenced the young Brown, one of whose first achievements was to design the Grecian valley at Stowe in 1748. In 1751, with 10 years’ experience under his belt, Brown started his own practice in Hammersmith, London, and over his busy career worked on more than 170 commissions.

A Hertfordshire expert on Brown is Helen Leiper, author of “Mr Lancelot Brown and His Hertfordshire Clients” in *Hertfordshire Garden History Vol II: Gardens pleasant, groves delicious* (2012). It is interesting that Brown worked for Hertfordshire clients from the beginning of his career, although fewer during his later years – he continued to work until his death in 1783.

1753	Moor Park for Lord Anson – payments to Brown, Nathaniel Richmond and William Ireland.
1753	Beechwood for Sir Thomas Seebright – a survey and plan of proposals (1754) exist.
1755-64	Cole Green Park for 2 nd Earl Cowper (possibly consulted from 1752).
1758	The Hoo, Kimpton for Thomas Brand.
1759-60	Ashridge for Francis Egerton, 3 rd Duke of Bridgewater.
1765-72	Durham (now Dyrham) for William Keppel.
1765	Wrotham Park for George Byng – visits by Brown and survey by Samuel Lapidge

1768-70	Littlegrove for Justice Edward Willes
c.1768-9	Youngsbury - possibly for Mrs Jane Poole but more likely for David Barclay.
1771-73	Digswell for Richard Willis

Pishiobury Park should also be included on the list although no archival evidence for Brown's work there has been found yet.

Whilst Brown was the most prolific designer and improver of landscape parks in the late 18th century, there were many other practitioners working on estates at the same time. Therefore, when the Hertfordshire Gardens Trust CB300 committee decided to create a series of walks to commemorate Brown's work, it was thought better to embrace the Landscape Movement rather than limit the scope to "Brownian" landscapes.

The 10 walks chosen were: Ashridge, Beechwood, Digswell, Kimpton Hoo and Youngsbury - all 'Brown' sites (with parts of the Cole Green landscape overlaid by a Repton landscape at Panshanger). Brocket and Newsells are by contemporary designer Richard Woods who shares the same birth year as Brown. Woods developed his own style – redolent of the *Ferme Ornée* – described as a "pleasure park" by his biographer, Fiona Cowell. Each of Woodhall and Pishiobury has a question mark over its designer.

When choosing suitable sites, the constraints were dictated by accessibility and enjoyment for walkers. The walks would all be on public rights of way. It was decided that it would be better to avoid long distances on busy roads wherever possible. Also, some parks are so well screened by belts of trees that any understanding of their design, and enjoyment of views, are lost to the walker. Another consideration was how much of the designed landscape remains. Sites such as Digswell have been compromised by the presence of development, as can be seen on the Google Earth image. However, all the sites chosen will give the walker the opportunity to have an understanding of the "designed" landscape, with views and buildings highlighted along the way.

The landscapes are fascinating, as they comprise multiple layers of history. For example, at Pishiobury, you will encounter old field boundaries dating from before the park was created; at Digswell, part of the walk explores the ancient Sherrardspark wood; Humphry Repton produced a Red Book for Ashridge in 1813, and later in the 19th century Jeffry Wyattville created an Italian garden there as well as the Bridgewater Monument.

Each leaflet is printable in PDF form and includes a small map, which has been devised by leaflet designer Tosh Moller. Included is a description of the route and a short summary of its historical context. Illustrations range from old maps and images, Google Earth views and photos of views you will encounter along the way. On each leaflet there is a small image without caption – the challenge is to find it!

To gain the most enjoyment from your walk we encourage you to take the recommended Ordnance Survey map (the Grid Reference of the starting point is on the leaflet) as this will give more information of the surrounding area.

The map (in a separate download) has all the Brown sites marked in red. The walks are named and marked with dotted lines of the circuit – red for the designs of Capability Brown and green for other designers. We hope you enjoy them!