

# Ancient and veteran trees in Capability Brown landscapes

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**This year sees the tercentenary of the birth of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, who is believed to have designed around 170 landscapes during his working lifetime. Brown incorporated and protected existing old trees in his landscapes, as well as planting hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of new trees. Many of these still survive as ancient and veteran trees.**

Brown was born in 1716 in the small hamlet of Kirkharle in Northumberland. The exact date of his birth is unknown, although the parish register records his baptism as 16 August in that year, so late July or early August seems likely. He is probably the best known of the great 18th-century

landscape gardeners, who included Charles Bridgeman and William Kent who worked before him and Humphry Repton who followed him, continuing into the early part of the 19th century.

Brown's early life is not well documented, but after leaving school he went to work locally in the gardens of Kirkharle Tower where he stayed until 1739. Then he moved south, ultimately becoming Head Gardener at Stowe in 1741. Whilst working for Lord Cobham at Stowe he was often 'lent out' to friends or neighbours to help them design their gardens, and in 1751 he moved to Hammersmith (at the time a small village on the Thames) and set up in private practice. He continued to design for clients, even after being appointed

*This article is provided by the Ancient Tree Forum, which champions the biological, cultural and heritage value of Britain's ancient and veteran trees, and gives advice on their management at [www.ancienttreeforum.co.uk](http://www.ancienttreeforum.co.uk).*

Master Gardener to the King (George III) at Hampton Court in 1764, a post which he held until his death in 1783.

The enduring legacy of Brown and the other great landscape gardeners is not simply that they designed the 'perfect' landscapes in which their clients wished to live and to entertain their friends, but that they created environments which continue to enthral successive generations and increasing numbers of people. As the population has increased, become better educated, more mobile and possessed of more free time than even the most enlightened 18th-century philosophers could have predicted, these landscapes still speak to us and deservedly rank alongside our great historic buildings, which many of them surround, as important landmarks in the history of our country.

But this wonderful legacy is not without its problems, as owners and managers of these landscapes and the arborists who support and advise them are well aware. All landscapes, whether designed or natural, are dynamic and in most cases require management (and in some cases considerable management) to ensure that they remain in a condition which is both desired and admired. Management of the trees within these landscapes has become far more complicated than it was for the original head gardeners and foresters who managed them for the private owners that first commissioned them – although in some cases even 300 years ago they had to deal with the problem of shortage of money so familiar to all modern managers, which caused owners to delay, reduce or even abandon works.

Leaving aside the ever-familiar funding problems, modern owners and managers have to deal with two particular problems that did not exist for their early predecessors: very large numbers of visitors and, leading directly from this, massively increased wear and tear on the landscape. Without exception, these landscapes were designed for the use and enjoyment of the few: the owners, their family and friends, the staff on the estate and perhaps local villagers and the occasional interested visitor – the equivalent of hundreds or perhaps low thousands of footfalls each year. Nowadays, again almost without exception, the landscapes which



The lime avenue at Clumber Park in Nottinghamshire. Avenues are a major feature of most designed landscapes and their management needs careful consideration. (Brian Muelaner)



**Chatsworth in Derbyshire (in 1983), one of the grandest Brown landscapes. With a backdrop of woodlands, the magnificent house is given scale by the individual and clumps of trees to the front. (Alan Cathersides)**

remain, even those still in private hands, are subject to hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, of footfalls each year because these landscapes, whether publically or privately owned, need to make revenue towards their upkeep through opening for regular visitors and special events.

Modern managers and arborists have to balance massively increased access with the dynamic, and in some cases quite fragile, nature of the landscape. Designating root protection zones with mulched circles, long grass, fences or similar to ensure that compaction around roots is avoided, moving pathways and desire lines away from old trees, keeping parking away from trees and repairing erosion before it can affect the

rootzone are now second nature to most managers and arborists. They are also much more aware of the importance of protecting beneficial organisms such as mycorrhizae by avoiding harmful spillages, waterlogging and over-application of fertilisers.

In addition to making it necessary to ensure that the trees and landscape are not damaged by this increased level of public access, modern arborists also have an additional duty, which was unheard of three centuries ago: that of health and safety. Ensuring that the trees are safe for both staff and the public to walk and work around is now a fundamental part of managing any landscape. Fortunately for the veteran



**Moccas Park in Herefordshire. Large expanses of parkland with large spreading trees feature strongly in most large designed landscapes. (Brian Muelaner)**

trees which make up such an important part of the most historic designed landscapes, understanding of tree dynamics has greatly improved over the last 50 years and continues to do so. No longer is the appearance of a fungal bracket or hollow trunk a virtual death sentence for a tree in a public space (just as well considering that both features are virtually compulsory for any self-respecting veteran tree!). Understanding the mechanics of hollow trees, as so clearly expressed by Claus Mattheck, and the importance of which fungi do what, as revealed by David Lonsdale and others, plus the work of the National Tree Safety Group (*Common Sense Risk Management of Trees*, 2011) have allowed arborists to make much more pragmatic assessments of the actual risk presented by old trees. The keen uptake by the industry of the advice given in *Veteran Trees: A Guide to Good Management* (Reid 2000) and *Ancient and Other Veteran Trees: Further Guidance on Management* (Lonsdale 2013) and the support given by many members to the Ancient Tree Forum also show that there is a strong understanding of the importance of old trees in the landscape, and a strong core of expertise in managing them well.

A final important strand for owners and managers of these historic designed landscapes is the ecological interest they now have. As a management concern this would probably come as a surprise to the originators of these designs. It is not that they were insensitive to nature – as a still largely rural population, most people would have understood the natural world much better than many today – but three centuries ago most ecosystems were not under threat from pollution, development, changing agriculture and many other sources, as so many are now. Many of the designed landscapes which have survived provide an area which has had a continuity of land management for centuries and which now contains a wealth of interlinked ecosystems. Fortunately, managing to maintain the historic design rarely conflicts with maintaining the stability of this important ecological resource.

'Capability' Brown and his fellow landscape gardeners have left us with an unrivalled collection of beautiful designed landscapes which contain a myriad range of old trees and an important ecological legacy. It is our duty to ensure that these continue for another 300 years – or more!!

There are a range of events being planned for this tercentenary year. For further details visit the 'Capability Brown 300 years' website at [www.capabilitybrown.org](http://www.capabilitybrown.org).



## What did Capability Brown do for ecology?

Ian D. Rotherham, Sheffield Hallam University

**The title of this article is the question to be posed at a major conference in Sheffield in June 2016.**

As we celebrate the tercentenary of Brown's birth there will be a flood of events and activities to mark the anniversary of the man frequently described as 'England's greatest gardener'. Lancelot Brown, more commonly 'Capability' Brown, was an English landscape architect, designer, and artist. However, most of the build-up to 2016, and the extensive media coverage and interest so far, has focused, and indeed will focus, on Brown's legacy of landscaped parks and gardens, the settings for great houses. Little has been said about the impacts of Brown and of his followers on British ecology. Indeed, there has been only limited research done on this aspect of the English landscape school.

Brown's reputation is based mostly on his approaches to garden design, though not everyone was impressed. Russell Page, for example, whose career started in the Brown landscape at Longleat, favoured more formal structures. He accused Brown of 'encouraging his wealthy clients to tear out their splendid formal gardens and replace them with his facile compositions of grass, tree clumps and rather shapeless pools and lakes'. The English poet and satirical author Richard Owen Cambridge stated somewhat sarcastically that he wanted to die before Brown in order to 'see heaven before it was "improved"'.

Brown's influence on past and contemporary ecology is at many levels, but specifically it occurs at two levels. The first is directly within the impacted landscapes, and the second is indirectly beyond the park pale. Capability

Brown protected some landscapes and transformed others. Generally, 'his landscapes', or those of his students and the landscapers who followed, are reasonably known. Some of these areas remain intact today but others have been lost to farming improvement or even urban sprawl. Nevertheless, even the parks and gardens that remain have been changed since Brown's day – through the evolution of taste, fashion, neglect and utility. To most fully understand Brown's landscapes we have to view them removed by over two centuries of change: sometimes abrupt and radical and other times slow and progressive. It is also essential to remember that Brown was preceded by influential gardeners such as Charles Bridgeman and William Kent, and followed by other landscapers like Repton and gardeners such as William Robinson. Brown's own training was as a gardener, but with a family background in estate surveying and experience of landscape drainage, perhaps in part gained when working on estates in Lincolnshire. He trained with Kent who was one of the founders of the emerging school of English landscape gardening and continued from the Arcadian tradition to create what many felt were picturesque parklands and pleasure grounds. Brown was probably directly responsible for 170 or more parks and gardens which provide settings for the finest country houses and estates in Britain. Others claim a Brown association



A typical Brown landscape with the ornamental bridge on the Clumber Estate in Nottinghamshire.

but often this remains to be proved. Brown's landscapes were described as 'improved', but this should not be confused with the agricultural improvement that swept through the countryside with the parliamentary enclosures. The two are related but different and distinctive.

## Key questions

1. What did Brown and his followers protect?
2. What did Brown and his followers destroy or remove or replace?
3. What was Brown's influence in and throughout the wider landscape?
4. What might be the future ecologies of these landscapes?

The impacts of the English landscape movement, for which Brown was a major innovator and influence, operate through social, economic and political processes and relate to changes in all of these. The results of the Brownian landscapers have consequences for future changes in the countryside, for landscape perceptions, for ecology and more.

## Within the park

Essentially, before modern agri-industrial processes and impacts, the results for ecology of major landscape changes in the countryside are not clear cut. The consequence of even major transformations is actually of a 'grubby' landscape in which species survive to re-colonise the new park and its ecological opportunities. Thus we see so-called ecological indicators of old or ancient landscapes reappearing after imparkation in largely secondary habitats. Over centuries, in a pre-industrial and less fragmented countryside, species are able to move more effectively and freely than we witness today. To understand the Brown ecology we must consider it within this 'pre-improvement' context.

Furthermore, although these landscapes were transformed by the landscape designers they were often only moderately 'improved'. This means that the plants and animals which are generally stress-tolerators and stress-tolerant ruderals are able to re-establish quite quickly, and we see a dynamic process of species acquisition over time after the imparkation. Some species survive and others re-colonise.

Importantly for current and future ecologies and for nature conservation particularly, veteran trees were often enclosed within the park and safeguarded;

when beyond the pale they were generally lost at a later date. However, there were removals too as some trees were ruthlessly taken out to create vistas or other landscape effects. Overall, the park environment may have provided important ecological continuity and protection for certain, selected features.

Brown both created water features and drained wetlands and modified rivers: on the one hand creating new habitats and on the other destroying or modifying existing ones. Similarly, he retained some veteran trees but removed others; and he planted parkland standard trees, plus mounds and roundels of plantation woods, and extensive roadside avenues.

The expansive grasslands so typical of Brownian School parks are often relatively 'unimproved' yet at the same time species-poor in flowering plants. This poverty may reflect often intensive grazing regimes over long periods but also origins in some cases from one-time arable lands. The older ecologies show through the more recent veneer of the landscaped park.

The origins of the landscape park ecology vary with location and the specific history and time-line of what was taken into the parkland and its subsequent management. In some landscape parks there may be direct links back to a much older deer park, and when this is the case, then the ecology may be uniquely exciting. These ancient parks were much more functional, productive landscapes than the ornamental parks of Brown's affluent clients. These were recreational countryside in terms of producing deer and other game for sport, but they were also important in the production of other vital resources such as timber and other grazing animals. The landscape parks, however, were primarily for ornament and were often designed as political statements in the rural landscape. They produced animals and other farm produce for the estate, but this was not their primary function. Intensive farming went on out in the 'improved' countryside beyond the park pale.

When a new, modern park took in older parkland it gained much of its ecology. However, many parks came from former common, heath, pasture, or arable field; these then influenced the ecology of the transformed landscape and the impacts may still be observed today. Over this modified landscape was laid out a new ecology of both planted natives and exotic trees, shrubs and herbs from around the world; Brown was working during a 'golden age' of plant discovery and this influenced what he could achieve.

## Beyond the park pale

Through the socio-economic and political structures and the fashions of the day, the influence of the park went beyond the pale and into the wider landscape. Associated with hunting, shooting, woodland management and the agricultural economy of the estate, there were and are significant ecological footprints.

It is suggested that with 'improvement' the countryside experienced the removal of wilder landscapes beyond the pale, but with parkland enclosures, the creation of tame wilderness within the park. In the latter it was safe for the household, and even the ladies, to recreate and to play in the sanctuary of a mock nature. In the sanctuary of the park, this tame wilderness had wider relationships to other movements of the 18th and 19th centuries – the Romantics and the Picturesque, for example. An unnamed obituary writer suggested that 'Such, however, was the effect of his genius that when he was the happiest man, he will be least remembered; so closely did he copy nature that his works will be mistaken' – in other words, when he had created 'wild, natural' landscapes. This was a matter of swings and roundabouts for Brown's admirers and his critics. Sir William Chambers, an authority on garden design, dismissed Brown's landscapes as differing 'very little from common fields, so closely is nature copied in most of them'. In this context, Brown's reputation quickly reduced after his death in 1783. This was in part because Brown removed many formal gardens, which people liked, and also because the 'English Landscape style' presented a tame nature and not the dramatic conflicts and impacts of wild nature. This provoked reactions against the harmony and calmness of Brown's landscapes which were seen as contrary to the excitements of the 'sublime' so precious to Romantics such as Richard Payne Knight and Uvedale Price.

## Unleashing the aliens

However, it is argued too, that Brown and his associates had further and major influence on contemporary ecologies through the introduction and fostering of exotic species. Many of these plants and animals were introduced to the British landscape by the great landscapers (e.g. Brown and Repton), or by their Victorian descendants. Through the Wild Garden Movement and the Acclimatization Societies, Brown and his successors wrought a major change in British ecology, the consequences of which still resonate across the landscape today. Over vast areas they brought about a dramatic change to recombinant or hybrid ecologies

of rhododendrons, laurels, giant hogweed, Japanese knotweed, giant knotweed, Himalayan balsam and much more.

Within the parkland landscape, the habitat creation of Brown and others often related to the management of water. On the one hand they desiccated wet landscapes, destroying unique and important habitats, and on the other hand they created ponds, lakes and other features now of value as feeding habitats to bats which roost and breed in the veteran, hollow trees.

In the recombinant ecology of the parkland, the woods today are populated by huge numbers of exotic pheasants and the lakes by vast flocks of North American Canada geese.

## In conclusion

In the wonderful Brownian countryside, ecology, trees, economy, history and heritage are woven into uniquely complex irreplaceable landscapes. Conservation and economy are tied together through land-use, leisure and tourism. Yet we know surprisingly little about the detailed ecology of these special places.

Finally, whilst it is clear that there is little known about the detailed aspects of the ecology of Brown landscapes, there are some general observations which seem to hold true for many sites. The veteran trees are remarkable and, in combination with the wide open grasslands and the waterbodies, hold rare species like bats. They also have remarkable faunas of rare invertebrates such as beetle and spider species, and floras of lichens and fungi. The wider landscapes of the parks, when they survive, reflect what went before with poor grassland or ecologically richer heath, marsh, or wood. When the landscapes survive relatively intact they are invariably managed and maintained by grazing regimes, though these may differ today from what went before.

Gaining a better insight into the ecology of Brownian landscapes is a task to be considered and investigated. This is because they are obviously important in many different ways. Furthermore, we know little of the relationships between Brown landscapes and recreation, leisure, tourism and the economic footprints today. Related to this there is a woeful absence of information on the roles of, say, iconic veteran trees and tourism, or of perceptions of landscape and hence the economic benefits associated with these.

Future research and conservation should seek to address these issues and the omissions. Visions of future 'wilder' landscapes would also be better informed

by an understanding through cross-disciplinary studies of the roles of Brown and his associates, and of the ecologies of Brown landscapes, past, present and future. Indeed, whilst Brownian parks may be seen as designed and even manicured copies of a wild vision, they do suggest what is possible in terms of landscape-scale creation and management. Although many advocates of so-called 're-wilding' dislike the English landscape gardeners and the later Romantics, their visions and aspirations are not altogether dissimilar.

In the meantime, we also see the influence and footprint of Brown and the landscape movement in smaller and more modest parks and gardens throughout Britain. In the invasive plants now spreading in recombinant ecologies across the countryside there is more than a nod to the created 'wild' landscapes of the 18th and 19th centuries. So, what did Capability Brown do for ecology ...?



## **'What Capability Brown did for Ecology: the legacy for biodiversity, landscapes, and nature conservation'**

**Conference on 15-17 June at Sheffield Hallam University**

With partners including the Ancient Tree Forum, the British Ecological Society, Historic England, Natural England, Sheffield Hallam University and others, and organised by the Biodiversity and Landscape History Research Institute, South Yorkshire Biodiversity Research Group and the Landscape Conservation Forum.

**For more information, please email [info@hallamec.plus.com](mailto:info@hallamec.plus.com) or telephone 0114 2724227**

## News update

**The ATF summer conference 2016 is being held in Dorset, and one of the themes will be ancient and veteran trees and the landscapes and legacy of Capability Brown.**

The event will be held on Thursday 7 and Friday 8 July at Kingston Maurward, a college just outside Dorchester which runs arboricultural and other land-based courses. There will be presentations from expert speakers in the mornings and afternoon trips to local sites, including Herringston (pictured) and a National Trust wood pasture site, Turnworth and Ringmoor Down.

Further details and online booking are available through the website at [www.ancienttreeforum.co.uk/events](http://www.ancienttreeforum.co.uk/events) or by emailing [admin@ancienttreeforum.co.uk](mailto:admin@ancienttreeforum.co.uk).



**A veteran ash at Herringston, Dorset, one of the sites delegates will visit during the ATF summer conference. (Sean Cooch)**