

Capability Brown in Warwickshire



Lancelot Brown was baptised on 30th August 1716. Following an elementary education he trained as a gardener in his native Kirkharle, Northumberland, before moving south in 1739.

In 1741 he became head-gardener at Stowe, (Bucks) the most visited garden outside London; famed for embodying the political idea of 'Liberty'.

There he came into contact with the leading exponents of a new, natural style of gardening that eschewed regularity, as symptomatic of tyranny, in favour of undulating and waving paths and ground, with promiscuously planted trees. The Grecian Valley was Brown's first essay in this style.

In 1749 his patron, Lord Cobham, died, leaving Brown free to pursue an independent career...

**WARWICKSHIRE
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Brown first worked in Warwickshire in 1746, when Lord Cobham lent him to help Lord Denbigh create the upper lake at **Newnham Paddox**, formed out of existing, formal canals. He was to return to Newnham a decade later to demonstrate his less well known skill as an architect, remodelling the Jacobean house with elegant, neoclassical facades. (Sadly this house no longer survives.)

Although a number of Brown's early patrons were the 'Boy Patriots' who had congregated at Stowe, his earliest, independent commissions owed much to the amateur architect of Shire Hall, Sanderson Miller, who seems to have been instrumental in persuading Lord Brooke to employ him at **Warwick Castle** (1749-68). Here Brown made extensive alterations to the inner bailey, creating the central lawn and building the entrance porch to the great hall. In the park, avenues were thinned to allow cross views, with the trees being replanted, joining more than 21,000 new elms.



Brown was to become most famous for his lakes, which although appearing natural, were constructed with huge labour and great expense. He favoured a riverine appearance and had a knack of making these appear endless by curling the ends out of sight and within woodland. This can be seen in what is his earliest extant plan, for **Packington Hall** (dated 1751 & pictured left)

Such lakes had a practical function in draining poor and sedgy land, making it suitable for grazing by cattle and deer. They were also fished, often by the expedient of removing the lake's plug and barrelling the carp, for sale in London.

Packington is particularly interesting because uniquely Brown's preliminary sketch is extant which is the only visual evidence of the old gardens. In it can be seen the avenue that ran from the church and dissected the house, before bordering formal canals. Contrary to the opinion that sees Brown as a vandal, here he did not destroy the avenues, his plan clearly retaining the part to the church and another avenue to the north of the stables. As elsewhere, Brown softened the entrance to these with flanking clumps. The 'Plan' also shows his characteristic park boundary formed by narrow belts of



trees (along right hand edge), to act as a foil to the tree clumps and specimens set in open turf.

In c. 1751 Brown began work at **Ragley**, perhaps supervising the moving of the public highway and its replacement by a private drive. Walpole was to find Brown's planting and attempts to modify an existing lake lacked perfection,. Little at Ragley survives to show Brown at his best.

Brown was early on called to advise on the *capabilities* for improvement at **Charlecote Park**, but it was not until 1757 that he began work on a small lake in the park. As at many other properties he built a ha! ha! to divide the garden lawn from the deer-grazed park; the two appearing to merge as one. His technical expertise was shown in his damming the River Dene so as to form a cascade as it discharges into the larger River Avon.

A reference in Brown's only surviving account book suggests that he did work for John Ludford at **Ansley Hall**, probably in the late 1750s - early '60s. Further

research is needed to establish this attribution and identify which parts of Ludford's extensive architectural and landscaping activities were Brown's responsibility, if any.

Brown certainly visited the county in every year until 1764, when he became royal gardener. In 1765 he sent his chief surveyor, John Spyers, to survey **Compton Wynyates** with a view to landscaping. However, the bankruptcy of its owner, the Earl of Northampton, following a fiercely contested election and landscaping of his Castle Ashby estate, ensured the abandonment of this particular scheme.

Edgbaston is another commission for which a plan was provided (for which Brown charged £42 - three times a labourer's annual wage) but the work appears to have been carried out by William Emes, acting on his own account.



By now the most celebrated of a number of landscape improvers, some of whom subcontracted as his foremen, Brown had huge pressures on his time. However, he was to begin one of his greatest masterpieces in 1768, **Compton Verney** (above). His lake is majestic and from wherever viewed seems boundlessly indeterminate, infinite even. Although large numbers of his trees no longer survive, his sense of balance, harmony and proportion are everywhere evident. He also built an elegant chapel and an ice-house.

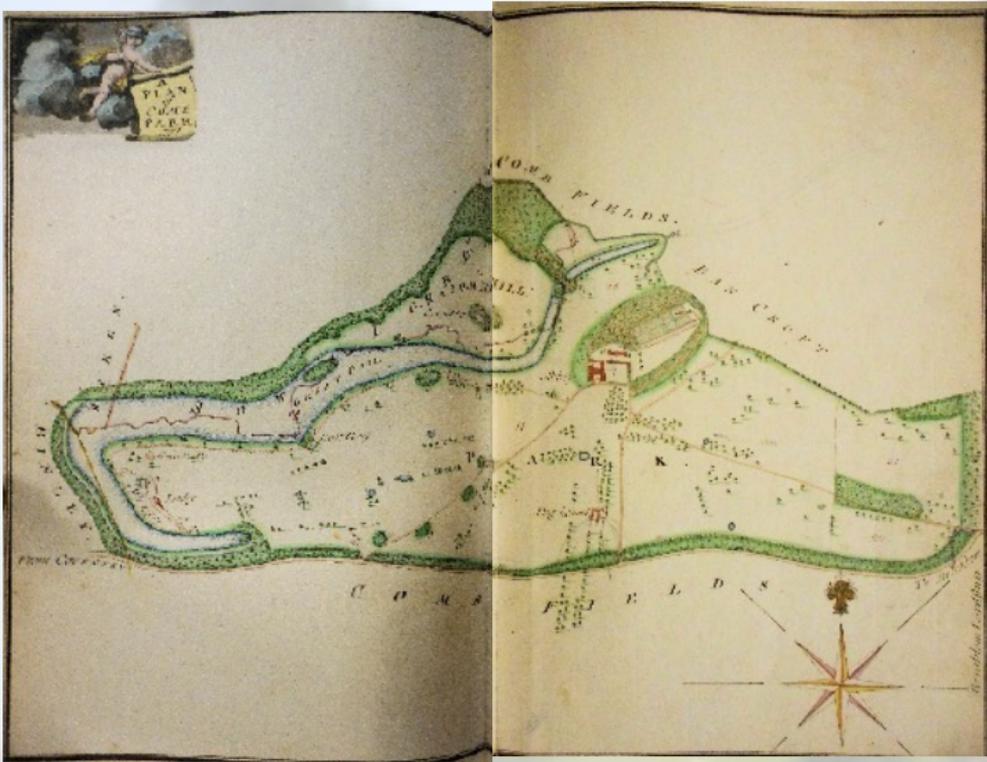


Compton Verney: Ice house and Chapel



The beautiful Sphinx bridge is probably also to his design, although sometimes attributed to Robert Adam, with whom he worked alongside on a number of projects.

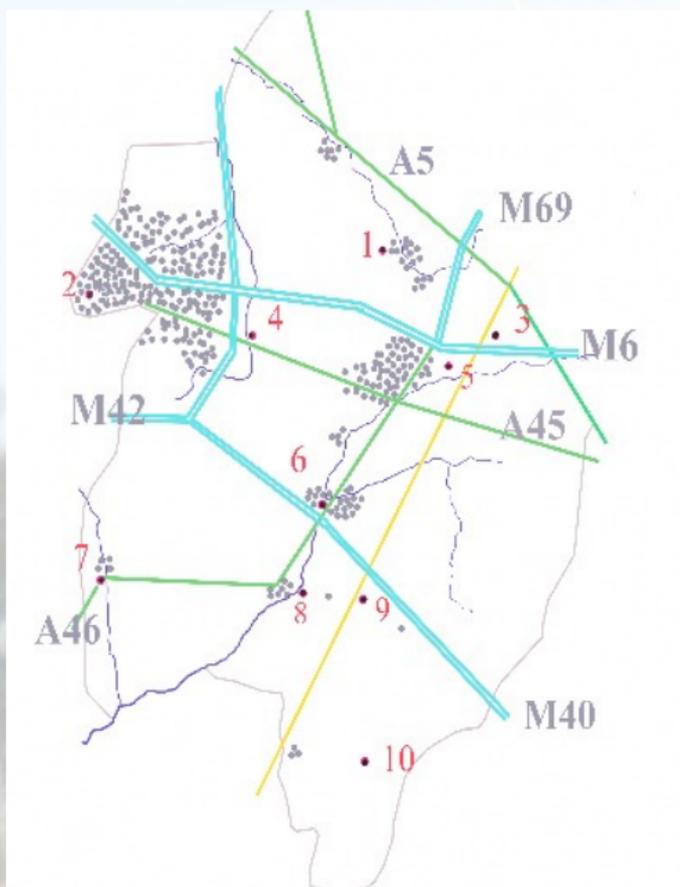
In 1771 Brown began the last of his known Warwickshire commissions, **Coombe Abbey**. Again, a large but very shallow lake was to be the principal feature of the plan. The tree belt is particularly noticeable, forming an oasis of art within the surrounding agricultural landscape.



According to Brown “Place-making ... when rightly understood will supply all the elegance and all the comforts which Mankind wants in the Country and (I will add) if right, be exactly fit for the owner, the Poet and the Painter”. His was a majestic art-form but one that was human, offering outlets for aristocratic ease and recreation, whether with gun or rod in hand or admiring a collection of rare animals in the menagerie at Coombe.

He justly deserves his epitaph which states:

“More than Genius slumbers here”



Anselm Hall [1] is not open to the public but a number of
 footpaths cross its land.
 Charlecote [8] www.nationaltrust.org.uk/charlecote-park
 Coombe Abbey [5]
www.coventry.gov.uk/info/136/coombe_country_park/
 Compton Verney [9] www.comptonverney.org.uk
 Compton Wynnyates [10] is not open to the public
 Edgbaston [2] is a golf club www.edgbastongc.co.uk
 Newnham Paddox [3] is not open to the public
 Packington Hall [4] will be open on 18th September 2-6 p.m.
www.warwickshiregardensrust.org.uk
 Ragley [7] www.ragley.co.uk
 Warwick Castle [6] is open daily www.warwick-castle.com

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