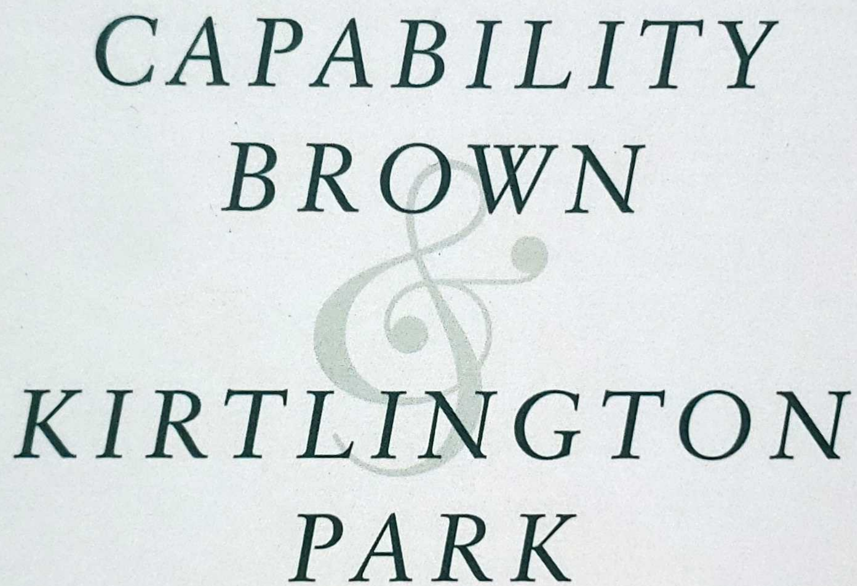
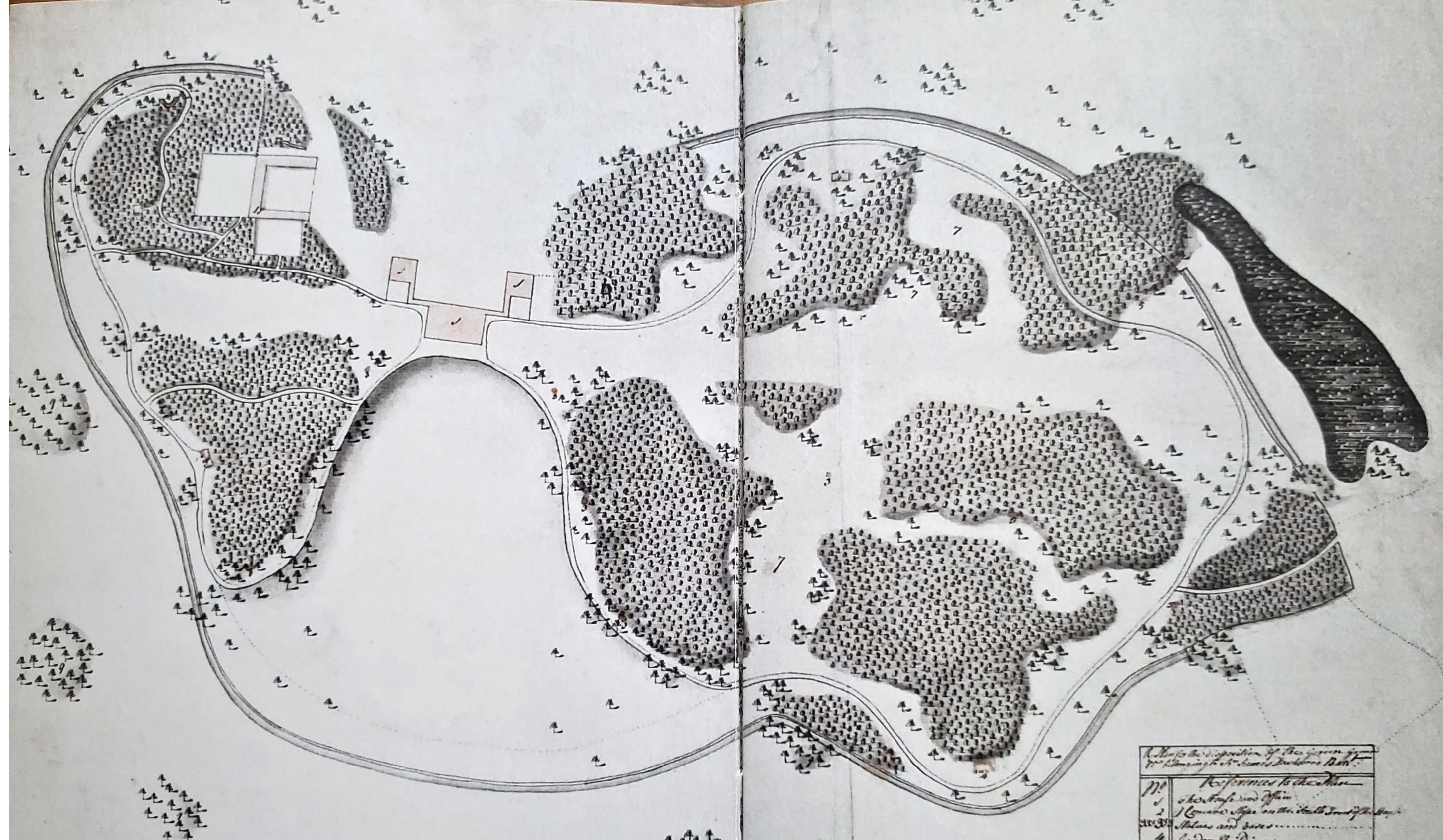
CAPABILITY BROWN & KIRTLINGTON PARK



A HISTORY AND GUIDE

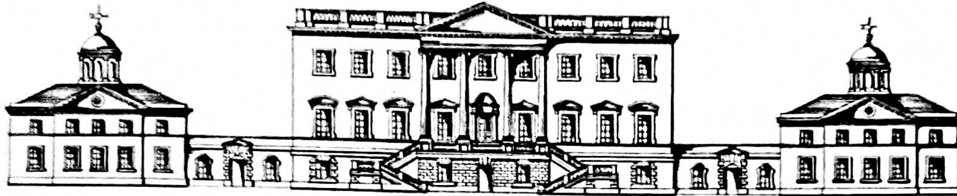


Capability Brown's plan for the surroundings at Sir James Dashwood's mansion at Kirtlington Park. The plan was accepted in preference to the proposals of the Royal Gardener, Thomas Greening.

Text by Adrian Fort

Photograph courtesy of Kirtlington Estates

The author gratefully acknowledges the help and guidance of Sally Nicholson, Heather Tylor, James Budgett, Christopher Buxton, Clive Syddall, Marcus Binney and John Phibbs.



Capability Brown & Kirtlington Park

A History and A Guide

Foreword

by Marcus Binney

ALTHOUGH NOT ENTIRELY A HIDDEN TREASURE, Kirtlington Park is less well-known for the genius of Capability Brown than are other magnificent landscapes such as Blenheim or Broadlands, Harewood or Highclere.

Yet Kirtlington bears all the hall-marks of Brown's transcendent skill: pleasure-grounds of perfectly mixed shrubs and plants, sheltering a family seat yet with well-placed vistas opening up the further horizon; an encircling ha-ha, protecting the gardens yet subtly merging them with rolling lawn and grassland; clumps of noble trees placed to sublime effect; still and stately water from which the mansion is gracefully perceived; a tree-lined boundary at once holding off the outside world while blending naturally with the country beyond.

All these merge in harmony, and each in its season is shown at its best, so that Kirtlington is brought to its full 'capability' by Brown, and remains a venerable part of his contribution to England's green and pleasant land.

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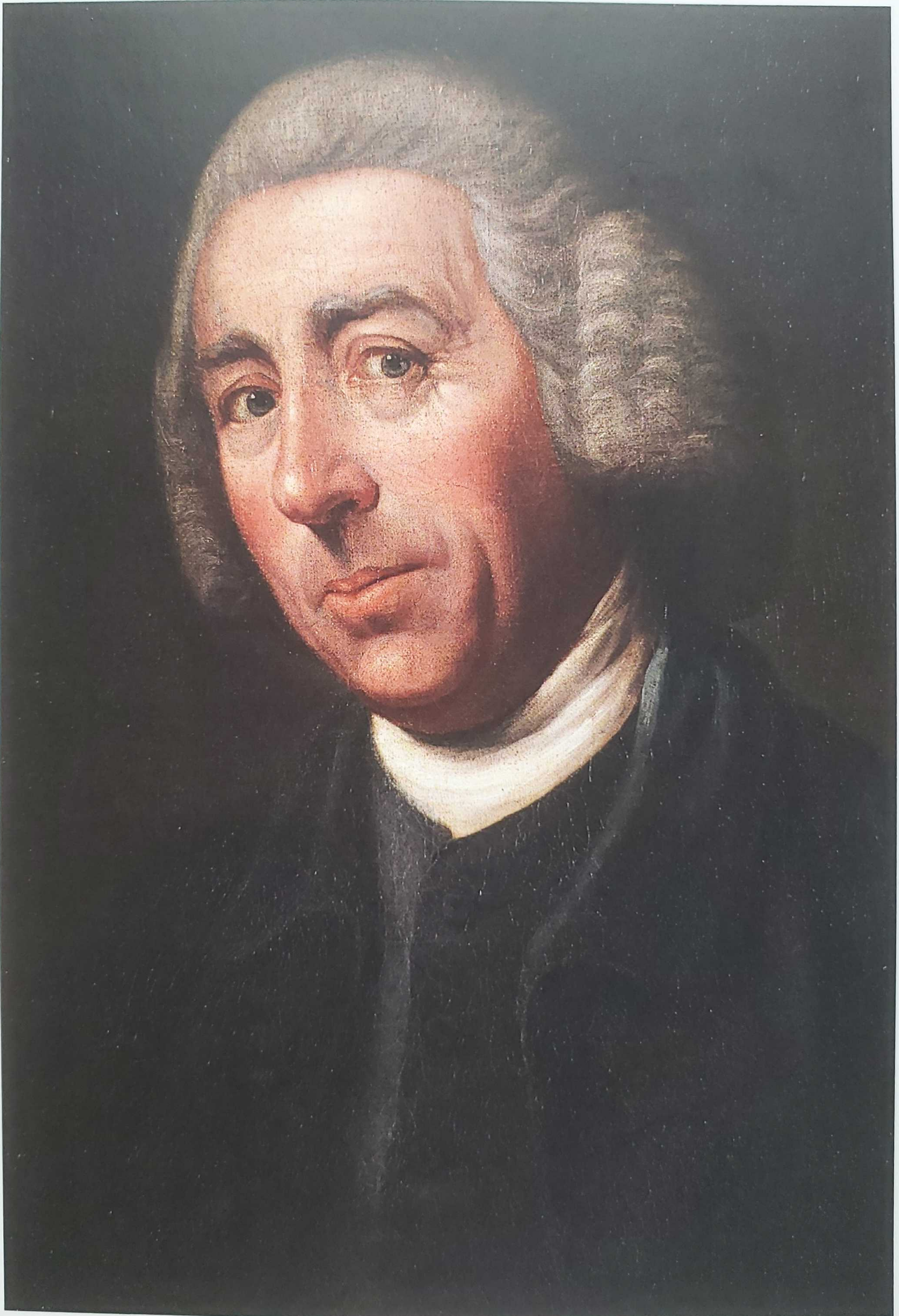
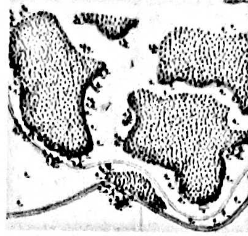


Capability Brown, by Nathaniel Dance, *ca*. 1773 (National Portrait Gallery)



Evolving Fashions in XVIIIth Century Garden Design

THE STATELY PARK AT KIRTLINGTON, with its high, imposing mansion, well-dressed pleasure grounds, tranquil waters, and verdant pastures unfolding into the distance, was by happy chance created at the time of the finest flowering of the English countryside.

It was towards the close of the seventeenth century that English landscape design began its approach to perfection. It evolved from the grand formality of the Continent, of 'le jardin à la française', with its clipped evergreens and geometric planting, whose champion was André Le Nôtre, gardener to the King of France, creator of the grounds of the Palace of Versailles, and in his day the inspiration of the favoured style in Europe - in the gardens of France and Holland particularly, but also close at home, most famously at Hampton Court.

Yet in England, ideas and fashions were changing. The country had entered a period of triumphant imperialism, with new and different concepts that reflected a burgeoning national self-confidence. The desire for greater freedom and informality began to pervade many aspects of English life. At the same time, Enclosure Acts, new farming methods, and the import of new varieties of trees and shrubs, combined to offer landowners easier ways of increasing profitability and improving their land, drawing labour away from garden maintenance, except in winter, when there was less to do on farms, and lessening the attractions of expensive formal garden designs.

With rich landowners returning from the Grand Tour inspired by the paintings of Claude Lorrain, Nicolas Poussin and Salvator Rosa, the 'Natural Style', of art blended with nature, was taken up by garden designers such as London and Wise, at their Brompton Nursery, and then by the famous pundit, Stephen Switzer, with his theory of 'Rural Gardening' suggesting that the embellishment of whole estates, enticing the occupants of the mansion away from its immediate setting and out into its surroundings, was the best way to manage land for profit and pleasure.

Switzer published his ideas in 1715, in what became a seminal handbook, *Ichnographia rustica: or, The nobleman, gentleman and gardener's recreation. Containing directions for the surveying and distributing of a country-seat into rural and extensive gardens by the ornamenting and decoration of distant prospects, farms, parks, paddocks, &c.* A parallel development was what Switzer christened the 'ferme ornée', mixing farming with beauty and pleasure by, for example, creating ornamental walks around working fields.

Praised by fashionable poets and scribblers such as Pope, Addison and Steele, these ideas developed as the century unfolded, and were put into magnificent practice by the champions, in their day, of the art of landscape at its zenith: most notably by William Kent, Lancelot Brown and Humphry Repton.

Like Kent before him, Brown took Nature herself as his inspiration, and, marrying to it his unique artistry and skill, he gave to the English landscape a blend of design and natural beauty that, two and a half centuries later, still flourishes around us.

Visitors to Kirtlington Park are fortunate in being within reach of several beautiful landscape gardens which trace the emergence of the genius of the eighteenth century, as it moved towards perfection in the hands of Lancelot Brown. Paramount perhaps are Boughton and Rousham. Boughton's gardens were developed mainly in the 1730s by Charles Bridgeman, an early standard-bearer of English garden design as it discarded European formality, and there the fussy, continental style of ornamental parterres gave way to simpler, open ground and majestic vistas, drawing the eye to distant belts of trees, while fountains and formal earthworks, neat canals and rectangular lakes, were placed in a more natural setting, of plain wide sweeps of grassland flowing to the edge of the mansion itself.

Rousham, only a few miles from Kirtlington, was designed at much the same time, first by Charles Bridgeman, but subsequently adapted by William Kent, the rising star of the new age. His vision of picturesque landscape art provides at Rousham the paramount example of the transition of landscape from manicured formality to sublime blend of art and nature. The ponds and rills of Rousham, the winding paths, the glades above the silent river, the Arcadian follies, and the eye-catcher 'calling in the distant view', mark the stage in the evolution of English landscape design immediately before Brown's time, partly inspiring him and which he soon began so memorably to extend, and on a much larger scale.

A number of other estates, developed slightly later, trace the early advance of Brown's career before he reached Kirtlington: Wotton Underwood, Newnham Paddox, Packington, Wakefield, Croome, Charlecote, Warwick Castle and Stowe; all are superb expressions of the new vogue for placing the spirit of nature at the heart of landscape design.

None of these estates are far from each other, or from Kirtlington, because of the chance that a number of the magnates who contributed to England's great political successes in the early eighteenth century, which propelled the country to the front of the world's stage, came from, or retired to, the Midlands. There they began to match the spirit of their surroundings – the 'genius of the place' – to the relative wildness of Nature, 'where the eye can roam free', implanting in their property the ideas of freedom which characterised the age. No longer was there love for stately Versailles or Fontainebleau, with their finery and waterworks, or for the myriad lesser country gardens that they inspired, perhaps most clearly Doudeville's Chateau de Galville, a jewel of perfection sleeping in the Normandy countryside.

With rich landowners returning from the Grand Tour inspired by the paintings of Claude Lorrain, Nicolas Poussin and Salvator Rosa, the 'Natural Style', of art blended with nature, was taken up by garden designers such as London and Wise, at their Brompton Nursery, and then by the famous pundit, Stephen Switzer, with his theory of 'Rural Gardening' suggesting that the embellishment of whole estates, enticing the occupants of the mansion away from its immediate setting and out into its surroundings, was the best way to manage land for profit and pleasure.

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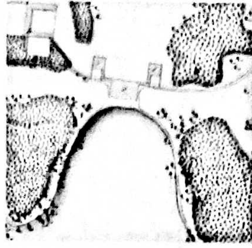


The Dashwood Family

INTO THIS FAST-CHANGING SCENE, already resplendent with new fortunes being poured into the creation of landscapes for their owners, came the jovial, ebullient figure of Sir James Dashwood: master of Kirtlington Park and of almost all that it surveyed, and soon to be a renowned and popular figure among the leading landowners and politicians in the county.

He was the great-grandson of George Dashwood, the man who had made a fortune some fifty years before Sir James inherited it. Prior to that, the Dashwoods were of little financial consequence; everyone, however, has to start somewhere, and place his foot on the bottom rung of the ladder to fame and fortune.

The family came originally from Dorset, migrating to Somerset late in the reign of Queen Bess. From there, in the time of Charles II, a scion of the family, George Dashwood, set out to seek his fortune. He found it in London, settling in Hackney and eventually becoming an alderman in the City and a commissioner of the excise and the hearth-tax, i.e. a taxman. Together with his half-brother William, Dashwood also joined a syndicate of merchants, which acquired from the government tax-farming rights over various taxes both in Ireland and England. By this arrangement, Dashwood and his colleagues agreed with the government to provide it with large sums of money, discounted to compensate for their paying on demand, secured on future taxes, which they were given the right to collect. It proved a highly profitable business.

A similar practice was first developed in Ancient Greece and later in Rome, its value to a ruler or government being the guarantee of immediate income. It is no longer used in England but in Good King Charles' Golden Days it was a

money-spinner, and the Dashwood coffers quickly began to fill and to multiply. In fact, when King James II abandoned his throne in 1688, Sir Robert Dashwood, James Dashwood's grandfather, was able to advance to the new king, William III, £100,000 in ready money. It was recorded that 'at that time he was the only man in England that could produce that large sum.'

The family fortunes were also augmented, several times, by the judicious marrying of heiresses; the Dashwoods were able to do this not least by the family having acquired large means of its own. Then, as now, that was almost always a necessary prerequisite, poor suitors being rarely welcomed by the families of rich daughters: it is usually not long, if such men get too close, before the sisters and the cousins and the aunts, and most of all the parents - start asking "Who is this young man? Who are his family? Does he have money? Or is he after ours?"

Such questions were not a problem for the Dashwoods, thanks to the tax-collecting, and accordingly in 1682 George Dashwood's eldest son, Robert, was able to marry Penelope Chamberlayne, daughter of Sir Thomas Chamberlayne, from a rich family settled at Wickham, near Banbury. By a marriage settlement dated 14th September, 1681, George Dashwood, of Hackney, Middlesex, agreed to pay Katherine Chamberlayne, Penelope's elder sister, £16,000, thereby releasing her prospective share of family assets, and enabling them to be transferred instead to Penelope.

Sir Thomas' grandfather had prospered in the law and in 1623 had bought the Northbrook estate, and land at nearby Kirtlington, including the Great Park and Wood, once part of the Duchy of Lancaster, but sold in 1604, by King James I. Kirtlington's historical importance stemmed also from having once been the residence of John of Gaunt, and its ownership had in 1420 passed to his grandson, King Henry V, victor of Agincourt. The family owned a number of other manors in Oxfordshire, while in 1695 Robert Dashwood had himself acquired more land by buying the reversion of Yarnton Manor, near Woodstock, from the daughters of the late Sir Thomas Spencer, coming into possession of it in 1711 on the death of Lady Spencer.

By reason of those various transactions, and of his father's generosity, Sir Robert had become a very rich man. His son, also Robert, increased the family assets further by marrying well, his bride being Dorothea Reade, who on her father's death brought to the Dashwoods the valuable manor of Duns Tew.

Although in those days there were many children born to the Dashwood family, numbers of them died before their parents. Such was the case with Robert Dashwood, who died in 1728, in Paris, so predeceasing his own father, who died on 14th July, 1734, and who at his death had no sons left alive. So the family fortune devolved upon his grandson James, born in 1715, and therefore still a teenager when he inherited.

In August 1732 James had set out in search of spiritual and intellectual improvement, embarking for France at the start of a four-year Grand Tour. In the course of it he was also to discover the pleasures of the flesh, managing to make his way through some £200,000, in current money, in little over half of his time abroad. Happy to bear the marks of his outward and visible pleasures, he soon weighed in at seventeen stone, ready to challenge all comers as the heaviest man in Oxfordshire.

In September 1736 he returned to the then family seat, Northbrook, just north of Kirtlington. By the time he inherited the Oxfordshire estates they had grown very large: to the east they reached what are now the outskirts of Bicester, and beyond, taking in Ambrosden, Oddington and Bignell; to the south, they included land at Wolvercote, on the outskirts of Oxford, while nearer the house itself the estate marched on some way beyond what is now the main Kirtlington Park lake, towards the Chiltern Hills. To the north-west they stretched as far as Banbury, so that should he choose to do so Sir James could be conveyed as far as that town entirely across his own land, a distance of some fourteen miles.

Home from Europe, and now the second baronet, James Dashwood also had married an heiress, Elizabeth Spencer. He won prominence in the county, being Sheriff of Oxfordshire in 1738, and represented the county in parliament, first from 1741 to 1747. With money and position he began to consider his surroundings. Many of his friends and neighbours were adding to their houses, or building new ones, and he might reasonably have been dissatisfied with his, at Northbrook, which had been built a century or so before, replacing an earlier farmhouse.

So he resolved upon a great plan: to demolish the Northbrook house and to build a new one at nearby Kirtlington. For its site he chose the highest piece of land in the neighbourhood; it was then part of a New Wood, so called, of many fine oak and Spanish chestnut trees, which merged to the south with a 'Great

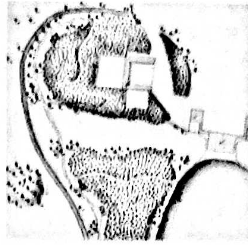
Wood', dating back centuries. A large part of each wood was cleared to make way for a park of nearly five hundred acres, to surround the new mansion.

Clearing the site must have taken a considerable time, even with an abundance of available labour, so it may therefore be that the idea for a new house originated with Sir James' grandfather. At all events the job was done by early 1742: Sir James' notebook records, 5th April, 1742, "Began to dig foundation of new house." April 22nd, "Laid the foundation stone of my new house, at the corner, under the right-hand column." He also noted, June 12th, "Began the water."

As well as building the house, Dashwood wanted a park. For that, he had commissioned the then Royal Gardener, Thomas Greening, who had submitted a plan, and although his involvement was soon to be ceded to Capability Brown, as described below, parts of that first plan were carried out. Hence the digging of 'the water': that may have related to arrangements for the mansion's drains, or alternatively to the small lakes, to the east of the house, known now as 'the fish ponds'. There is also a row of smaller ponds, called Otters Pond, almost now silted up, to the west of the stables: in the eighteenth century inland water was important for the provision of fish to a mansion; it was also, as at Kirtlington, often a particularly attractive part of the landscape.

Some four years later, although the house was not yet wholly finished, the family took up residence. In August 1746, port and Champagne were moved into the house, and in his notebook Dashwood records, "August 30th, 1746. Went into my new house." In the words of a contemporary account: *This edifice is erected upon an eminence in the middle of a large park, commanding a very extensive prospect over a rich vale bounded by the Chiltern Hills.* Horace Walpole, celebrated man of letters, and son of the Prime Minister, recorded his impressions of the mansion, all the more prominent in its newly cleared ground: *I passed by Sir James Dashwood's, a vast new house, situated so high that it seems to stand for the county as well as himself.*

It was to stand all the higher when Capability Brown had perfected the landscape in which it was set.



Lancelot Brown and the Path to Kirtlington

BY MID-CENTURY, WHEN BROWN had reached his early thirties, his progress was well established. His journey to fame had started at Kirkharle, a village in Northumberland some twenty miles north-west of Newcastle. His mother was a chambermaid at the local Big House, seat of the Loraine family, and his father was land agent to the owner of the estate, Sir William Loraine – although in the light of Brown's distinguished and far from humble characteristics, and the outstanding ability that he was subsequently to evidence, some have occasionally wondered about his paternity.

In 1732, aged sixteen, he began his career in the park at Kirkharle. Sir William Loraine was an ambitious gardener, and his schemes for kitchen gardens, propagating yards, new paths and drives, the planting of hedges, and the raising and replanting of coppices, gave Lancelot Brown the early grounding in hedging, fencing, draining, the matching of trees and plants to their ground, and other aspects of practical gardening that was to prove a vital ingredient in his career.

There he worked for seven years, until about 1739, when, aged twenty-three and by nature ambitious, he left home. With an introduction to Lady Loraine's father, Richard Smith, then living at Preston Bissett, about twelve miles from Kirtlington, he headed south. Smith was well-known in his area, and steered his young guest into the employment of Sir Charles Browne, owner of Kiddington Hall, near Woodstock, who was landscaping his park, probably inspired by work in progress at Stowe, an estate in the next county which by then had become famous, drawing praise and admiration far and wide.

Brown was given the job of creating a lake in the Kiddington park, and although it was his first commissioned project it had many of the attributes so widely associated with him later: the damming and enlarging of a little river; grassy slopes, planted with groups of trees, leading down to the water's edge; a tree-covered island at the new lake's widest point; and, where it narrowed, a drive across a small bridge.

The Kiddington lake 'was the first piece of water which he formed', and it would seem that with this work he made an almost instant impression, gaining a reputation even at that early stage which led to his employment at Stowe. As recounted by John Penn, who knew several of Lord Cobham's relations, and a number of Brown's friends and clients:

> *It was, however, in consequence of an enquiry made near this time by Lord Cobham, from a nurseryman, whether he knew of any one who could continue with him at Stowe, able to converse instructively on his favourite pursuit, but free from the vanity and conceit which had rendered his former associates disinclined to alterations upon which he had determined that Brown, already a landscape gardener, became an intimate of that princely mansion.*

Lord Cobham was Stowe's owner, and a soldier with a great fortune gained from booty won during the War of the Spanish Succession. He had been a leading member of the Administration of Sir Robert Walpole, Britain's first Prime Minister, but in 1733 had retired from active politics. With a 'passion for building and gardening', he turned more fully to developing his park. He was supported by a close circle of friends and relations which included a 'mob' of his nephews from Wotton, the Lytteltons of Hagley, and also the poet Alexander Pope, whose verse championed the harmony of landscapes with Nature, adapted to the context of their location:

> *Consult the genius of the place in all, That tells the waters or to rise, or fall... Now breaks, or now directs, th' intending lines; Paints as you plant, and, as you work, designs.*

In charge of the transformation of Stowe was William Kent, by then the country's foremost landscape gardener, who was gradually naturalising the 'semi-formal groves and plantations' established by his predecessor at Stowe, Charles Bridgeman.

Brown was only twenty-four, but it seems that he rapidly fulfilled Lord Cobham's initial hopes and expectations, and as Kent did not visit his landscape operations very regularly, his drawings for his proposals began to be handed to Brown for execution. In 1741 openings, including a suicide, occurred which resulted in him taking on a considerably larger rôle, becoming not only head gardener but also handling payments to the workers on the estate and acting as a clerk of the works for alterations and development of buildings as well as in the grounds.

His skills also included architecture, for which he later gained renown: early in his time at Stowe he began studying technical books on the subject and practising drawing plans, one of which it seems was a commission from Lord Cobham.

The next step along his path was at Wotton Underwood, about fifteen miles east of Kirtlington, an estate belonging to Cobham's nephew and heir, Richard Grenville, who 'borrowed' Brown from his uncle.

Apart from when he was on loan, he was to remain at Stowe until 1751, and from the early 1740s he began to deal with projects which, although originating with William Kent, gave him the practical experience that he needed for his own commissions; as stated by Dorothy Stroud, in her seminal work on Brown:

> *The replacing of Bridgeman's formal parterre by a lawn to the south of the house in 1743, the cutting of cross views through the avenues, and some alteration of the lakes, were all carried out under his supervision, as was the planting of thousands of trees, mainly beech, elm and Scots fir...In 1742-3 he was organising the supplies of stone from three different quarries, and the work of four masons then employed on work in the house...as well as new stables and coach-houses. He would also have been concerned with the building in 1747 of the octagonal column, 115 feet in height...*

At Stowe he also supervised the softening of the edges of the lakes, and the construction of the Grecian Valley, which 'involved the removal of 23,500 cubic yards of earth, to form an extensive glade of dog-leg outline with thickly planted slopes.'

Next, in 1745, Brown was consulted by the Earl and Countess of Denbigh, close friends of the Cobhams, about altering their grounds at Newnham Paddox, and the following year work began there, for 'the alteration of ye great canal, and carrying it on to ye head of ye Pond in the Park by a Plan and the direction of Mr. Brown, Gardener to Lord Cobham, with other work done in consequence of this.' The work at Newnham Paddox included turning formal ponds and canals into a serpentine lake to the north and east of the house, and it was to continue on and off for several years; Brown was also to design a new façade for the mansion.

Shortly afterwards Brown began work at Wakefield, a hunting lodge a few miles from Stowe, and belonging to the Duke of Grafton, to whom Lord Cobham had recommended Brown. The landscape had been designed by Kent, but it was unfinished when he died, in 1748. Brown took over management of the alterations, and the taste that he evinced there, it is said, 'laid the foundation of his future fame and fortune'.

At Wakefield he again created grounds sloping down to a lake, and on its far side 'a noble lawn, nearly a mile in extent, the smooth features and soft tints of which are finely contrasted by the bold and abrupt aspect of a dense woodland scene terminating the view.' The work reflected Brown's understanding of the importance of the varying colours of coniferous and deciduous trees, and of the juxtaposition of water and rolling lawn, of which he was on his way to becoming a past master.

In 1748, while still at Stowe, he won a smaller commission from Richard Grenville, at Finmere Rectory, just west of Buckingham. There, it was recorded, he planted trees, a shrubbery and a dell, surrounded by a ha-ha, resulting in a perfect miniature landscape: *A slope of green turf...cedars, spruce firs, groups of other well chosen trees and shrubs and pretty flower beds; all so disposed as to produce the effect of a long perspective and considerable space where there was really little* – a reflection of his ability to plant and re-model ground so as to optimise perceptions of size and distance.

Aerial view of Kirtlington Park.

The following year Brown started extensive work on both buildings and grounds at Warwick Castle, where he replaced four parterres and an ancient mound, with grassy slopes planted and descending to the River Avon, which lapped the castle walls. He also developed a stream into a serpentine lake, and planted trees along the park perimeter either side of a carriage drive which ran across the dam which formed the lake.

In the same year, 1749, Brown received his most important commission until then: the design of a mansion and a church, as well as the grounds that would surround them, at Croome, in Worcestershire.

The project was to prove an enormous undertaking, and for him a great advance. Much work on the ground had already been completed, but on it he superimposed his genius, developing the estate further, besides designing and building a new mansion, and constructing numerous eye-catchers, conceived by himself, a grotto at the head of the water, an arched tunnel and a rotunda to the south of the house. As explained by Jennifer Meir in *Sanderson Miller and His Landscapes*:

> *The detailed treatment of the large ditches and the 'river' banks is thought to have been carried out by Brown. These ditches have shallow turfed slopes, to facilitate animals approaching them to drink. The original 'river' was later given a more serpentine outline, and the edge of the banks lowered slightly so that rushes and other vegetation did not impede sight lines.*

The owner, Lord Coventry, later wrote that *Mr. Brown has done very well by me, and indeed I think has studied both my Place and my Pocket, which are not always conjunctively the Objects of Prospectors.* It was a clear satisfaction to Brown's clients, and an encouragement to prospective ones, that Brown worked tirelessly and quickly. With his exceptional eye for ground it often took him but an hour or two to plan a new landscape and to mark it out.

He had succeeded with major work at Stowe, besides, 'lent' to his friends by Lord Cobham, large-scale designs at Warwick and Croome; he was also now asked to plan two landscapes, some forty miles north of Kirtlington:

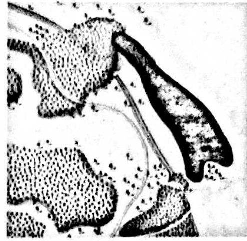
at Charlecote Park and Packington Hall. He was fast becoming what today would be called a 'must-have'.

These new projects were to bear his now established imprint: serpentine lakes connected by narrow ribbons of river; garden buildings and grottoes; gently-sloping, grass-grown banks; smooth, undulating lawns laid up to the edge of the house; conifers forming perimeter belts and wilderness; singles and clumps of oak dotted in rolling grassland: the landscape which became the quintessence of so much of England's landscape.

One link between Brown and many of his clients, who were to include Sir James Dashwood, was an Oxford-educated gentleman-architect and landscape designer called Sanderson Miller. He was the same age as Brown, whom he first met near the end of the 1740s. A friend of Lord Cobham, he recorded spending five hours walking the grounds at Stowe with Brown, in November 1749. Miller, also a friend of Lord Coventry, had carried out the original work at Croome, and had recommended that Brown take over.

Brown was then at the outset of developing his own private practice, a consequence of the death of Lord Cobham, in September 1749. He did not leave Stowe for a further year, but then moved to Hammersmith to found a business of his own.

Meanwhile, in the autumn of 1750 or early in 1751 Miller had recommended Brown to Sir James Dashwood.



Brown's Master Plan, and What We See Today

DASHWOOD'S PLANS FOR HIS HOUSE had first been drawn up in 1741, and a few years after that he had turned to the layout of the land surrounding the house. For this purpose he had commissioned a plan from Thomas Greening, gardener to King George II, but he had become disenchanted with it, and eventually, via his friend Sanderson Miller, that led to discussions with Brown, who in 1751 signed a contract for laying out the park. It was to cover an area of approximately 450 acres.

In the event, the main work was to take about four years.

He received a payment on 17th January, 1752, for £100, about £20,000 in current money, 'for work he was doing', and further payments between £100 and £500 at intervals until 1757. In 1754 or 1755 he signed another contract, to cover work until 1762. The payments formed part of Dashwood's total expenditure on his house and landscape work, between 1741 and 1762, which amounted to £32,541, or about £6½ million in current money.

By now Brown was very clear of his objectives, and how to meet them; he later described to a friend his 'ideal for a garden and place':

> *To supply all the elegance and all the comforts which Mankind wants in the Country, and be exactly fit for the Owner, the Poet and the Painter. To produce these effects there wants a good plan, good execution, a perfect knowledge of the country and the objects in it, whether natural or artificial, and infinite delicacy in the planting etc.*

> *So much beauty depending on the size of the trees and the colour of their leaves to produce the effect of light and shade so very essential to the perfecting of a good plan...hiding what is disagreeable and showing what is beautiful...shades from the large trees and sweets (scents) from the smaller sorts of shrubs...*

In accordance with these principles he set about surveying the lie of the land at Kirtlington, selecting favoured objects to draw the eye, noting where planting would be needed to veil unwanted views or those too much exposed, deciding how best to use the contours, to construct hills or dells if changes were required and could be done without too much expense. Too large an area of flat land could be addressed by the creation of water areas within it.

His plan for Kirtlington bore many of the features for which he was becoming famous – even if he was subsequently sometimes criticised for working too much to a formula. Broadly, he divided his plan into three separate parts, as it were concentric circles at the centre of which stood the mansion.

First, an outer perimeter belt of woods and lines of trees, but with gaps to provide contrast, opening up pleasing distant views.

Second, within the belt, a middle-distance park, which was really his forte, of wide encircling parkland, giving aesthetic pleasure at the same time as allowing for profitable pasture. With it would blend wide sweeps of open lawn, running up in places to the edge of the house; yet he understood the value of balancing open space by retaining or planting groups of trees, mainly oak, and sprinkling the expanse with single trees, to avoid it seeming too extensive or uniform.

In or bordering that parkland he planned the essential lake or other water elements, situated to give views of the house to its best effect.

Third, close to and encircling the mansion, except where the lawn came up to its front, he would form the pleasure-ground, of which the essential character was a style known as 'grove', combining wilderness, arboretums and flower-gardens. The ground would be opened up with vistas leading to the edge of the parkland, directing the eye to pleasant prospects, but

edged with closely planted areas of trees and shrubs, thereby providing sudden transitions, with contrasting scenes never visible together. A path would follow the encircling border of the pleasure-ground, and within it a few other paths, lined by flowers and shrubs, leading to garden seats or ornamental buildings from which to look back at the mansion or out to the country beyond. Walking through the garden would provide a series of enjoyable surprises.

However, there was now a difficulty: parts of Greening's plan had already been put into effect, and they did not chime with Brown's ideas.

Greening had constructed a straight-edged walk, which remains to this day, along the south front of the house; it was about twelve feet wide, enough for two couples to pass each other. Also there were vistas, with more or less straight borders, leading north and due south, and a wide avenue travelling east, and ending at the edge of a fish pond.

In general, he had followed the ideas of Switzer: a semi-natural effect, leaving or planting woodland close to the west of the house, but on the east side creating large numbers of small clearings, monuments and ornamental buildings, with many winding paths running around and through them. The disadvantage of his ideas, which Dashwood probably sensed, was that they resulted in the house being too much surrounded by woodland, cutting off most of the attractive views.

Yet although Greening's plan for the north part of the park is marked 'totally changed by Brown', his proposals were not in fact for a complete alteration, as he did retain much of the woodland to the south. However, he entirely redesigned the landscape to the north, clearing the remains of the woods, and replacing them with the wide and beautiful expanse of lawn that flows up to the front of the house.

Between the park and the pleasure-ground he planned a ha-ha. This ingenious invention had been in occasional use for many years but it was Brown who made it a staple of his designs, and who mastered its art. Essentially it is a dry moat, one side of which - the garden side, which needed protection from animals - being a wall: at Kirtlington Brown built a dry Oxfordshire stone wall, probably originally about five feet high. The far side was grassed, sloping down to the wall. Dashwood was interested in

horses, his farms and his stock, and there would have been deer and game in the park. A ha-ha served as 'a sort of valve: the most sprightly deer would wander down the bank and then find himself faced by a wall when in no suitable position to make a leap' – so much the more so in the case of sheep or cattle, which could not leap at all.

It protected the gardens from incursion by cattle or grazing animals, yet aimed also to maintain the harmony of the landscape without interrupting the views to the park; the break in the terrain was effectively disguised by the ground either side of it being identically planted, usually with grass.

Brown had to address another obstacle: the topography of the estate. It presented the new mansion stark on high ground recently cleared of its chestnut trees and ancient oaks; below it, in an arc to the south, a wide, flat expanse stretched towards the Chiltern Hills some thirty miles away. That land was either scrub or grazed and managed for wood-pasture, and was studded with the oaks of the Great Wood, centuries old; also, advancing close to the house, was the New Wood, perhaps a misnomer as much of it had been planted when owned by the Duke of Clarence, in the late fifteenth century.

Although Brown must have given Dashwood detailed ideas for the park perimeter and all the middle distance landscape, two of his other plans survive. One showed in great detail the pleasure-grounds within the ha-ha, or 'fosse' as Brown called it. The other depicted the ground stretching east and north of the house to a perimeter belt of trees, to run from the south-east in a broad arc along the edge of the park, crossing the main drive, until it reached the church behind the village, with a few gaps at intervals to break the monotony and to allow a distant prospect.

Most of the north park was to be shorn of trees, save a dozen or so clumps of oaks and elms; Brown had several different ways of planting clumps, often sowing seed in them; sometimes the main trees were planted at intervals of about fifteen yards, with, interspersed to protect growth, others which would eventually die or be removed, to leave a clump of the finest trees, so characteristic of his landscapes. In the meantime, as with saplings in the perimeter circuit, clumps and new trees had for some time to remain fenced to protect them from animals.

In the same area he suggested planting or leaving many single trees, particularly to the east of a main vista stretching due north, pointing up the empty sweeps with a perfect variety of planting, without interrupting the distant prospect, the effect increased by wild flowers of many types and colours, glistening in the sun.

So the paramount image would be of the north park forming a majestic wide sweep of grassland, rolling up to the edge of the mansion, high above its surroundings.

Even so, while Brown delighted in blending his landscapes with the nature of the location, he was attracted by a certain amount of artificial symmetry. So his plan called for each end of the ha-ha to be roughly equidistant from the house, beyond its east and west wings, and to be planted thickly at each end in order to screen the house's offices and stables while emphasising the open prospect leading from the centre of the house.

Symmetry was also provided by the contours of the north park as they sloped away from the house, north-east and north-west. Although there would have been at least a hundred or so labourers available, particularly in winter when there was not much work on the farms, it is not clear whether Brown ordered earth-moving to alter the lie of the land of any of the north park, which might have been possible with earth from digging the lake, or from the creation of dells in the pleasure-ground.

He was certainly a master of the heavy work required for landscape design. While at Stowe he had invented a remarkable machine for moving mature trees, very little practised in England before his time; this comprised a pole about twenty-five feet long, with a small front wheel and two large rear wheels; the pole would be placed vertically against a tree to be transplanted, and tied to it; the roots would then be cut off at the appropriate points, and the pole and tree pulled down to a horizontal position by the use of ropes, before being drawn by up to six horses to the site selected for replanting. With this device Brown could and did transplant trees of up to about thirty-five feet in height. No doubt this contributed to one of the ways in which he was so successful, in that he could imagine what his landscapes would look like when they reached their perfect age and maturity, notwithstanding that by such time he would be long dead.

The planting of mature trees near the drive went some way towards satisfying one of Brown's axioms, to prevent the surface of the approach from being visible from the house; in some cases he also aimed to screen a mansion from the sight of approaching guests until it could be seen from an advantageous viewpoint, preferably close on final arrival.

At Kirtlington he found that where the drive entered the north park, movement on it could be observed and duly noted by servants at the top of the house, who would then be ready to descend and receive guests by the time they had travelled up the drive. He could therefore effect his preference, to keep the house out of sight until its optimal vantage-point was reached, by taking the carriageway in a sweep to the right, where, because of the contours of the park and because of the protection given by proposed clumps of trees, the mansion would come into magnificent view only just before arrival.

For this purpose he called for a thickly-planted roundel to be grown about three hundred yards north-west from the house astride one of the approaches. However, it seems that the lord of the manor did not agree, and the plan shows the protecting wood scratched out, presumably by Dashwood. Nevertheless, he was able to retain a thick crescent of trees, opposite the stables, to shield the house from view until the final approach, then revealing it close-up in sudden splendour.

Brown solved the problem of the flat land to the south of the house by planting a perimeter circuit of trees stretching west to the park edge, at the road from Kirtlington to Bletchingdon, and another to the east. Between them, perhaps his most impressive creation, was to be a low-banked lake, about five hundred yards long. It had two purposes: to be seen, and to be a vantage-point. In his day, for viewing houses or landscape, the alternative to walking was the bouncing and uneven jolting of carriages, or of riding on horses. He was sure that instead the way to view a principal mansion to best effect was from water, not least because its surface, when weather permitted excursions upon it, would be still. He constructed a boathouse at the east end of the lake, to which Dashwood's guests would be taken, and from the smooth sunlit water they could gaze up at the house in all its glory.

In keeping with his principles the lake was not well-ordered or rectangular, as his predecessors might have proposed, but slightly cucumber-shaped, narrowing at one end. Brown had discovered that ideally lakes, as the one at Kirtlington, should not be fed by streams, as they tended to cause the lake water to silt up. Although the lake might seem to be a surprising distance from the house, from which it appears only as a thin line, Brown placed it in a perfect and natural position, ideal for looking back at the house, for breaking up the surrounding landscape and for enhancing the impression of space and grandeur. The prospect was further improved by planting five roundels of oak trees at intervals on ground between the lake and the pleasure-ground to the south of the house.

From the lake, Brown extended the perimeter belt, called the 'Long Plantation', in a north-easterly arc to near the eastern border of the park; along this plantation he constructed a winding ride, a method he often used in order to enhance the feeling of the impressive size of an estate.

Dashwood's comment that Brown changed Greening's plan did, however, apply to most of the pleasure-ground. To this day its structure retains the form that Brown intended, although a number of his trees have gone.

His design was for an area of about eighty acres around the house, to be bounded by a ha-ha. Designed as a butterfly shape, the pleasure-ground was to be about 850 yards long at its widest, and about 450 yards deep from north to south. In the event, the house is placed just to one side of the pleasure-ground's centre, on its dominating summit - about a thousand feet from the encircling ha-ha where it passes due south, 800 feet from the west, and 1600 feet from the east. Providing some symmetry, the ha-ha ends in the north park at approximately the same distance, 550 feet, from the corners of the east and the west wings.

He included ornamental buildings, statues, garden seats, undulating paths, and a fish pond just beyond the eastern boundary, but the ground was lightened and given a much less cluttered aspect than that planned by Greening. Eleven or so plantations of mixed trees were separated by winding avenues. The glades and dells were often grazed, and he planted grass either side of the ha-ha so that the crossing from pleasure-ground to

park should be seamless. Shepherd-boys would have tended grazing sheep, and also prevented them from falling into the ha-ha. Grass was cut each day and taken to the stables, eventually to be given to the horses.

A path was laid approximately along the perimeter, near the line of the ha-ha, to give people walking around it the variety of sudden contrasts between open views and screens of trees. The path was also wide enough for a carriage, and the high verge on its inner side is testimony to another of Brown's preferences, that the wheels of a conveyance should not be seen touching the ground. Leading inwards from the perimeter Brown constructed what he called undulated paths in the woods, bordered with flowers, shrubs, yews and conifer trees.

The contrast of light, space and dark plantation was provided by the long straight main vistas crossing the pleasure-ground, and by the variety of the shape and size of each of the eleven plantations.

For the planting he could develop Greening's base: a note dated July 6th, 1748 shows that a hundred and forty-seven types of trees and flowering shrubs were planted in the pleasure ground; no doubt Brown approved of many of them, for example cedar of Lebanon, American cypress, Virginia ash, larch and evergreen oak, which he left in situ. Near his home at Hammersmith there were several leading nurseries which provided him with trees and shrubs, and by 1751 he was a client of the botanist Peter Collinson, who imported, especially from America, many varieties new to England.

He did away with most of Greening's temples and pavilions, but at vantage points around the perimeter, giving distant views across the park, he placed six or more ornamental huts, covering views to all points of the compass; garden seats looked east some sixty yards to Greening's pond, smaller than Brown's long lake to the south but of much the same shape. The huts and seats have long disappeared, a small thatched pavilion being the last to survive, finally falling into ruin near the end of the last century.

He placed statues at three regular intervals along the inner borders of the plantations south of the house, and in the cleared space on either side of the south front.

The spacious effect of the whole was maintained by keeping the north-south and east-west vistas. They give a fine, broad view north from the house across the lawn, and southwards three hundred yards to the edge of the park, disguised by the ha-ha; then on to the lake, three-quarters of a mile distant, the eye directed finally towards the blue misty Chiltern Hills. As Brown intended, the prospects from each part of the house were different: from some parts, long empty views; from others, closer and fuller, plantations, flowers and shrubs.

The paths of the pleasure-ground were designed to lead to vantage points showing distant views; for example, a yew walk, where Brown planted the original trees at varying intervals to avoid the formality of an avenue, leads from a garden gate south-west down from the house, to the edge of the park and a fine view of a distant cedar tree.

On Brown's plan that walk was about a hundred yards long, grassed and about ten foot wide. It was formerly a dark tunnel until it neared the ha-ha, but pollarding has since opened it to the light. At its top there were until recently two very tall beeches, but neither is there today.

He also planned a path turning up past the stables, to traverse a copse north of the yew walk; that path was then to turn sharply south, crossing the east-west vista. There is doubt that the copse was ever planted as originally designed, although the barn there is eighteenth century, and Brown liked to screen such buildings if they would otherwise be visible from the house. Until recently a tall lone pine grew to the east of the stables, but the planned site is now bare of trees, although there are six oaks, of varying ages, nearby.

Moving east, in effect away from the village, along the circular path bordering the ha-ha at the pleasure-ground perimeter, are still the contrasting scenes that Brown intended, of screened thick plantation, mainly yew and laurel, which he much favoured, giving suddenly onto open space and distant views. Here a vista, about fifty yards wide, slopes down to the ha-ha, and is lined along one side mainly with old, tall oaks, and along the other with a short dense plantation. The open view uphill shows a long yew hedge dividing the garden at the back of the house from the view south.

Continuing east, passing the remains of the thatched building, once used as a tea-house, are tall English oaks and Sessile oaks, above the path

stretching towards the summit and the house. Further along the path, coming upon the main, wide, south vista, and looking north-east, are clumps of newer oaks, and tall Douglas firs and Scots pines.

The vista to the south is about a hundred yards wide, with a score or so of yews and oaks to the north and east, with more old and newer oaks on the far side of the ha-ha; one stump is of an oak once reputed to be the eighth largest in England. The view back uphill shows the south front of the house, and cedars to its east.

Beyond the vista is another contrast: the ground to the south of the path is cleared some ten or more yards to the ha-ha, while above it there is a dell with a single oak above its west rim. As the drive turns north there is a dense plantation, of English oaks, sweet chestnuts, laurel trees and sycamores; looking south-east, but just within the ha-ha, are a large oak and sweet chestnut, a horse chestnut, and, further on, a sparse plantation of limes.

Beyond that point, before the ha-ha turns north, is a long plantation, 'Large cockshot copse', and about a hundred yards north of it a small, round plantation, 'Little cockshot copse', beyond which are two fish ponds; in the Greening and Brown plans there was one, but there is now a second, about ten years old.

A short walk further ends in the east vista, about fifty yards wide, its south side thickly planted with mixed trees. Visible to the east, on the boundary of the polo ground, is a clump of oaks planted about thirty years ago, to replace an original one cut down to make way for a polo practice ground.

Turning back uphill towards the house, walking west, the ha-ha borders the north park, which in that part is planted, as in Brown's design, with single oaks only; it ends about a hundred yards short of the north-east point of the house's east wing. Brown planned a plantation at this juncture, to match his design for a plantation below the west wing, but now there are no plantations in the park near either wing.

For most of its length the ha-ha is now largely silted up, overgrown and partly hedged, while formerly, where it crossed the vistas, it would have been grassed on both the pleasure-ground and the park side, invisible and with animals grazing on either side.

Beyond the estate's borders Brown would hardly have comprehended modern developments: the rash of housing, tarmac roads, street lights, and other trappings of modern life. However, in the north and west park, and walking south and east towards the perimeter, starting from the western end of his ha-ha, he would even today clearly and pleasurably recognise his handiwork,

One entry point from the pleasure-ground to the outer park is where the yew walk reaches the ha-ha; there it points towards a sunk hedge constructed by Brown and characteristically planted with trees a quarter of the way up one bank, effective as a stockade for animals and pleasantly disguised. The design also provides for a fine prospect of a tall cedar, a favourite tree of Brown, in the perimeter belt; from there the eye is also drawn to a circular plantation of Scots pines; then and now that was known as John of Gaunt's Plantation, because of its association with a house nearby in which had lived John of Gaunt.

Scots pines were rare in England in the mid-eighteenth century, and were reputed to indicate a place of refuge to Jacobites or their sympathisers. There was a saying that a gentleman could plant his politics, and when Dashwood first planned his park Bonnie Prince Charlie was still at large. Sir James was known to have declined to subscribe to the Association formed in Oxford in October 1745, in support of church and state, just before the Young Pretender's march on London, and it was thought that the Scots pines at Kirtlington, like those at Chastleton, were a mark of respect to the Pretender. Although the fears aroused by the '45 abated five years before Brown began his work at Kirtlington, it was there that he first made extensive use of the Scots pine.

The sunk hedge can be seen beyond the ha-ha where the yew walk ends; its original purpose may have been to drain water from the house. It runs into Otters Pond – originally Hothouses Pond, now in disrepair – which Brown widened into two ponds just to the south of an attractive bridge, which he built. It carries the back drive, leading from the Bletchingdon lodge towards the mansion, over the ditch carrying water from Kites Pond, in the village, to Otters Pond. Brown disguised that ditch with an inner belt of trees planted part-way up one bank; the dip in the ground a short way to its east is known as Grimsdyke, or Aves Ditch.

The lake itself and the distinctive wooded perimeters are much the same now as when placed there by Brown, although he would hardly recognise the land beyond, the ancient oaks long felled or fallen, and removed to make room for modern agriculture. The perimeter belt runs down from Park Farm, at the north-east corner of the park, towards the lake, then south of it, and then west towards the Bletchingdon road; east and north of the lake it is known as Long Plantation, and west, as Cordle.

Forty-five acres of arable land on the western side, known as The Mowings, have been returned to grass, and oaks have been planted - a mixture of clumps and single trees. Beyond, his perimeter plantation flourishes still, a boundary wood of mixed oak, ash and conifers, and it will be sustained by the planting of woodland and individual trees on the south and east edges of the park.

Today, Brown would find the lake itself largely unchanged, save that the boathouse has long since collapsed and disappeared – the man-made artifices have not withstood the years, in contrast to Brown's ingenious blending of art and nature in his landscape. The lake was recently dredged, and has led to a notable increase in the variety of birds there.

Between the lake and the ha-ha is arable land but on it are five roundels of Brown's design; very much one of his trademarks, they form an arc: beautiful ingredients in the panorama looking south from the house; they are now getting thin, with some of the oaks very mature, but fortunately they will benefit from the current programme of replanting.

To the east of the lake, then north, runs the Long Plantation, of mixed conifers and deciduous trees. A track, wide and firm enough for carriages, runs along it and the lake, and leads to the back drive to the Bicester lodge, the eastern entrance to the park. Due east of the Long Plantation is an outer belt, Gallowsbrook Plantation, running as far as Akeman Street at the park's eastern edge. The Long Plantation stops south of Park Farm, at the north-east point of the park, but a fine perimeter belt, as appears in Brown's design, still runs alongside the polo ground, bordering the park to the north of the house, and joining a plantation leading back almost to where the main drive enters the park: all just as Brown planned it.

However, his plans did not extend to the outer edge of the north park, today entered past the lodge on the Heyford road. That is now lined by chestnut trees planted in 1993 as a memorial to the estate owner, Mrs. Hazel Budgett, who had died the previous year, having owned the Kirtlington estate since she and her husband bought it in 1921; the previous owner, the Earl of Levens and Melville, had bought it from the Dashwood family in 1908.

The approach to the house maintains very largely its original shape and image, although Brown extended a perimeter belt west of the drive as it enters the main park; that has now gone, and the horse-chestnuts now lining its route were planted after his time; even so, the tallest of them is over forty yards high.

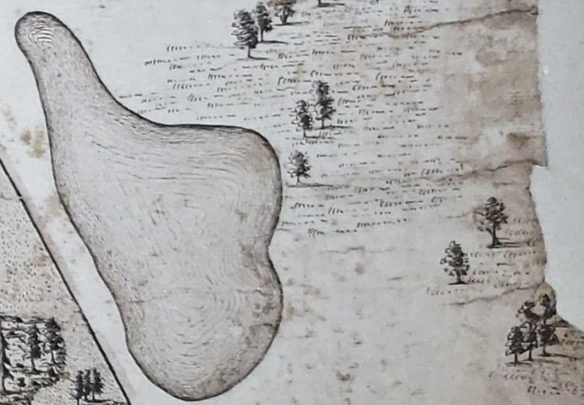
On approaching it, the house is more visible than in Brown's day, yet in summer still well protected from early view. That is partly because of the maturity or death of a number of oaks, whether single or in clumps, and the loss of elm trees. Nevertheless, recent planting of almost two thousand trees and shrubs in the northern and western parts of the park has been carried out in conformity with Brown's original designs, presenting wide vistas from the house in several directions and maintaining the beauty of the arrangements of small clumps and many single trees. Their effect is enhanced when walking around the northern park.

Currently the park is being sectioned for re-planting, with views of vistas recorded and re-planted where replication has been or will be needed because of aging or dying trees: the north park sees new oaks, chestnuts, a few cedars, and lime trees, so maintaining its past splendour. This will meet Brown's intent that, not just from the house, but walking around the park, many different vistas should be revealed.

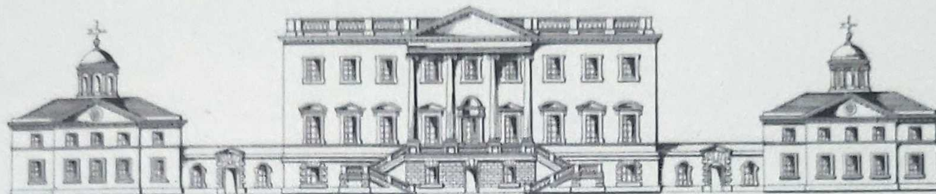
Brown died some thirty years after his main work at Kirtlington was finished, but such was his ability, and the capability of the park, that he could clearly see how his design would appear in future years; and the balance and grace of his work, its harmony with Nature, has endured so that it is almost wholly recognisable even today.

So now we have the fortune to see around us an island of beauty, charm and tranquillity. Nearby and to the far horizon we see a gentle blend of

lake, lawn and pleasure-ground; of trees and hedges, ancient and new, in harmony. We see a landscape painting, matched and coloured by the seasons, tempered by the years, but undimmed and enduring, three hundred years from his birth: the essence of the unfailing genius of Capability Brown.



The plan submitted to Sir James Dashwood by the Royal Gardener, Thomas Greening; this plan was partly executed, but was eventually abandoned in favour of Brown's.



Although not entirely a hidden treasure, Kirtlington Park is less well-known for the genius of Capability Brown than are other magnificent landscapes such as Blenheim or Broadlands, Harewood or Highclere.

Yet Kirtlington bears all the hall-marks of Brown's transcendent skill: pleasure-grounds of perfectly mixed shrubs and plants, sheltering a family seat yet with well-placed vistas opening up the further horizon; an encircling ha-ha, protecting the gardens yet subtly merging them with rolling lawn and grassland; clumps of noble trees placed to sublime effect; still and stately water from which the mansion is gracefully perceived; a tree-lined boundary at once holding off the outside world while blending naturally with the country beyond.

All these merge in harmony, and each in its season is shown at its best, so that Kirtlington is brought to its full 'capability' by Brown, and remains a venerable part of his contribution to England's green and pleasant land.

From the foreword