

In 1771 Brown began the last of his known Warwickshire commissions, **Coombe Abbey**. The survey celebrating its completion shows many of the characteristic features of his designs. The ‘natural’, serpentine or riverine lake that here is but a small part of massive water engineering to drain marshy land; the surrounding belt of trees, creating an oasis of art and leisure within the wider agricultural landscape; the careful placement of specimen trees and clumps to conceal and reveal as one travels around the footpaths and carriage drives that snake around the property. The planting is designed to “hide... what is disagreeable and shew... what is beautiful.” Thus, he

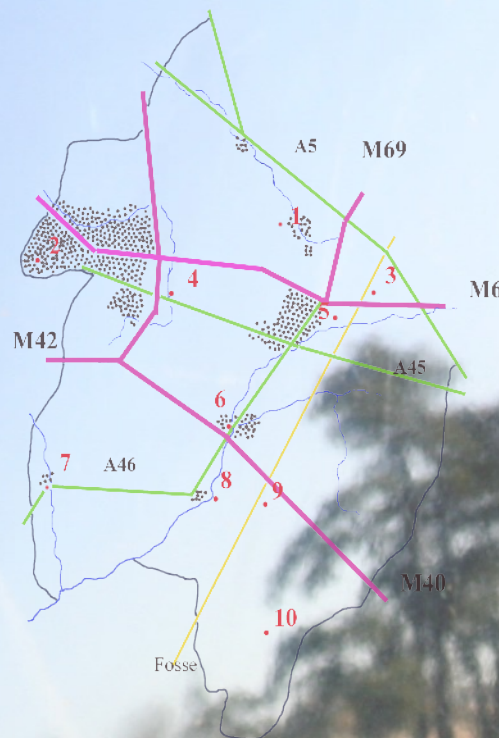


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conceals blemishes and areas of production, the ‘gravel pit’, kitchen garden and stables within planting and thins the old avenues which would otherwise impede views within the parkland. Further comfort and convenience is given by the many fine buildings that Brown designed to populate the ‘Place’ - lodges (above left), gates, kennels and a menagerie (above right). These reinforced the message that country living could be civilised - the natural land polished - and an idyllic haven for leisured existence created. That this reinforced the ‘natural’ right of a leisured class to political dominion was not lost on his aristocratic patrons who bestrode their parks, gun or rod in hand, like latter-day Roman senators, their mansion - seat of their magisterial power - periodically on view, the heart of Brown’s compositions. Conspicuous expenditure was expected of them, Brown was only too happy to oblige!

It is as much these sociopolitical connotations as any perceived borrowing from seventeenth-century landscape painters that raise Brown’s landscapes to cultural significance and confirms them as works of art.



Ansley Hall [1] is not open to the public but a number of footpaths cross its land.

Charlecote [8] www.nationaltrust.org.uk/charlecote-park

Compton Verney [9] www.comptonverney.org.uk

Compton Wynyates [10] is not open to the public
Coombe Abbey [5]

www.coventry.gov.uk/info/136/coombe_country_park/
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 pm

www.warwickshiregardenstrust.org.uk

Ragley [7] is open daily www.ragley.co.uk

Warwick Castle [6] is open daily www.warwick-castle.com

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“But know that more than Genius
slumber here”!

Epitaph on Brown’s tomb in Sts. Peter and Paul, Fenstanton, Cambs.

Capability Brown in Warwickshire



Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown, c. 1770-75, Cosway, Richard
(1742-1821)/Private Collection/Bridgeman Images

Called the ‘Shakespeare of gardening’ because he was thought to share the bard’s genius in his ability to comprehend the capabilities of common nature and transform it into art - in much the same way that the playwright fathomed and presented human nature - it is fitting that Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown should have had such a close and enduring relationship with Shakespeare’s county. His very first independent commission was to be in Warwickshire and he was to tread the same parkland, at Charlecote, over which Shakespeare had famously poached the Lucy family’s deer.

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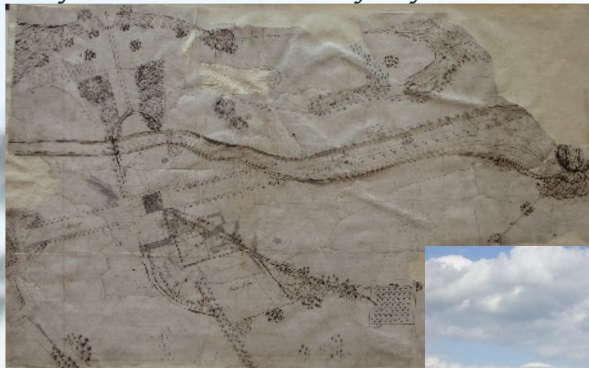
According to Brown “Gardening and Place-making ... when rightly understood will supply all the elegance and all the comforts which Mankind wants in the Country and ... be exactly fit for the owner, the Poet and the Painter”. The last two could find inspiration in a ready-made work of art, one conforming to classical rules of balance, harmony and proportion. The owner, however, required more than living in a work of art. To it must be added convenience. In Warwickshire Brown was to exemplify his versatility as an holistic designer of ‘Places’. Capability Brown first came to the county in 1746, whilst he was still head gardener at Stowe, Bucks., when his services were lent to **Newnham Paddox** to transform its formal canals into a naturalistic lake - thus following the new craze for all things natural. He was to return here in the following decade to show off his less well known skill as an architect, adding elegant, classical facades to Lord Denbigh’s old Jacobean mansion (since demolished).



It was to Sanderson Miller (amateur architect of Shire Hall) that Brown owed his first independent commission, when he was called to **Warwick Castle** in 1749.

Here he greatly increased the privacy of the estate, removing a number of buildings and rights of way to the river that impinged on the castle. Although necessitating the creation of an inland drinking pool for the town cattle, this made it possible to create a new garden to the south of the castle and a continuous carriage way around the park. Within the bailey he raised the level of the courtyard, which he turfed, to provide better drainage to the castle and built a *gothick* porch to the great hall. The one remaining contract for his work here concerns construction of a tile-roofed ice house. In the park Brown widened the Ram Brook to form a serpentine canal, crossed over its narrow dam, and supervised much of the extensive tree planting (including 60,000 oaks) that was carried out at this time. His influence probably outlasted his last recorded payment in 1761.

In the following year Brown was employed at **Packington Hall**, where Lord Guernsey was evidently keen to spend part of the vast fortune brought by his wife. Uniquely not only does the ‘Plan’ (dated 1751) survive but also the preliminary sketch (below), which is the only visual source for the formal gardens that Brown was to flood with one of the many lakes for which he was justly to become famous.



Expensive to construct these had use, beyond an aesthetic of variety. They drained poor and sedgy land, making it more suitable for grazing by deer and cattle, but could also be fished for pleasure and profit. Here the plug was removed and the fish barrelled for sale in London!

Ragley was also to be an early commission. In 1751 a public highway through the park was rerouted, possibly (as at Packington) following Brown’s recommendation but his modifications to an existing lake were found by Horace Walpole to lack perfection. It is probable that Brown designed and built the walled kitchen garden, one of a great many that he created to supply the comfort of year round produce. Although there is some evidence of his earlier involvement with **Charlecote Park**, it was not until 1757 that he is recorded as having started work on widening the Wellesbourne Brook. To achieve this he damned its outflow into the River Avon, concealing this by a cascade remarkable for its naturalism. Formal terraces and ponds behind the house were removed so that turf could slope down to a widened river. A ha/hal was constructed to keep the deer (descendents of those that escaped Shakespeare?) from the garden, whilst making the garden appear one with the outlying park. Contrary to popular opinion, Brown did not always destroy avenues - preserving one here, as well as a number at Warwick Castle and Packington.



In 1764, by now the most celebrated of a number of landscape gardeners (some of whom subcontracted as his foremen), Capability Brown became “gardener to the king” at Hampton Court Palace. In spite of the additional workload of providing all the fruit and vegetables for the royal court, Brown still continued to tour the country. In 1768 he began one of his great masterpieces, **Compton Verney** (above). Again, a lake is the principal feature, the combination of several smaller pools. Here he showed his characteristic mastery in concealing bounds, so that from whichever angle viewed it appears endless. He built two bridges: one to carry the highway over what is a steep weir to a lower lake; another possibly to a design by Robert Adam, with whom he worked on a number of properties. Comfort was provided by an ice-house, an orangery and for the hereafter, a chapel. Many of Brown’s trademark Cedars of Lebanon survive.



Three places deserve brief mention as having documentary evidence to suggest a Brownian connection, though little or none of his work remains. One ‘Ludford’ paid Brown £400 in 1764, the only known landowner of this name being John Ludford of **Ansley Hall**, who was a Warwickshire lawyer well-known to Brown’s other, local patrons. In 1765 Brown’s surveyor, Jonathon Spyers was sent to **Compton Wynyates**, but the immense debts of the Earl of Northampton precluded any work and even obliged him to sell Brown his estate at Fenstanton at a discount, for work done at Castle Ashby. Another plan was produced for **Edgbaston** (for which Brown charged £42 - three times a labourer’s annual wage), though the finished landscape was probably executed by William Emes, acting on his own account.