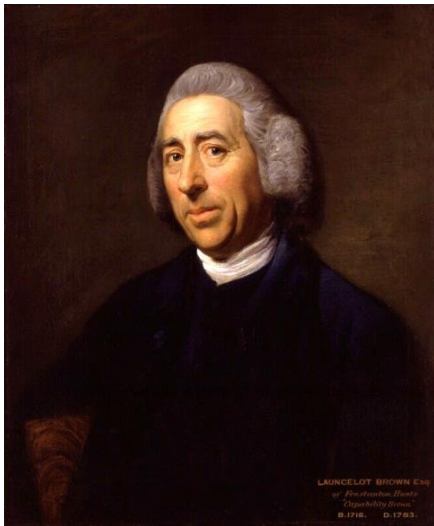


Landscape architect Lancelot 'Capability' Brown and his work around Battle



1. A brief personal history of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown



Capability Brown

by Nathaniel Dance (later Sir Nathaniel Holland, Bt)

NPG 6049



National Portrait Gallery, London

Brown was born in Kirkhale, Northumberland in 1716 to yeoman farmer William Brown and his wife Ursula (née Hall). Young Lancelot was their fifth child and one of six surviving children. He worked as a gardener at the local big house before he left Kirkhale in 1739 and moved south via Lincolnshire, where he met his future wife Bridget Wayet. He ended up working for Lord Cobham at Stowe in Buckinghamshire in 1741. Brown married Bridget whilst there in 1744 (they went on to have at least nine children).

Whilst at Stowe Brown learnt from the work and ideas of others notably the polymath designer, artist, architect and landscape architect William Kent (c1685-1748) and from Kent's predecessor at Stowe, Charles Bridgman. Bridgman (1690-1738) was an English garden designer who helped pioneer the naturalistic landscape style and is credited with the introduction into England of the ha-ha¹ to country estates and the laying out of the extravagant Stowe garden. Lord Cobham must have spotted Brown's talent and encouraged and supported the developing Brown.

In 1750 Brown was commissioned by the Earl of Coventry to redesign his house and park at Croome (Worcestershire). Brown set up his own business in 1754 and was consulted about altering the grounds at Burghley House near Peterborough. In 1760 he was working at both Syon House and Alnwick (Northumberland) and in 1761 at Chatsworth (Derbyshire). King George III appointed Brown as Royal Gardener for Hampton Court and St James's in 1764, with a salary of £2,000 a year.

Brown's habit of talking about the 'capabilities of improvement' of a property earned him his nickname. During his working life he changed the face of many eighteenth century English estates, moving hills, creating new lakes and serpentine rivers, all within naturalistic parkland with rolling grass and selective retention of existing woodland copses plus new tree plantings – particularly of cedar of Lebanon, which became his 'signature' tree. He was not just a landscape architect, but also designed houses, churches, follies and garden structures, and was renowned for his skill in engineering large water features. Once his career took off his work quickly became highly fashionable and a huge amount of work came his way. He was clearly a constant traveller and workaholic and he is reckoned to have designed 265 landscapes in England, of which 170 survive. He died aged 67 in 1783 and was buried at Fenstanton (Cambridgeshire), which had become his family home and where he had acquired the Lordship of the Manor of Fenstanton and Hilton.

So what did he do on estates around Battle? The simple answers are either probably nothing or possibly very little at Battle Abbey, some early work at Brightling Place and a lot at Ashburnham Place.

2. Battle Abbey

Although some gardening historians think that they can detect some influences of Brown in the landscape of Battle Abbey's park the evidence is very scanty. Indeed English Heritage's listing of the site makes no mention of Brown or any other landscape architect and describes a mainly open landscape with few trees and only comments on minor remnants of the 16th c. and 19th c. gardens, and also that not much evidence is seen of an established park from either Budgen's estate maps of 1724 or the 1840 Tithe maps. Phibbs reports that Willis suggested an attribution to Brown based on studies of Brown's accounts at Drummonds Bank at Charing Cross which cover the period from 1753 (some four years after Brown left Stowe to start an independent career as a landscape designer) to his death in 1783. The Drummonds accounts are now held in the Royal Bank of Scotland archives and can be accessed by appointment in their public search room in Edinburgh².

Phibbs adds that some detail of the Battle Abbey parkland is in Brown's style. However there is no evidence that Brown was actually involved, and if he had been it might only have been for early, possibly informal, advice. Payments to Brown received from the Montague family between 1768-74 are recorded in Brown's own account book (which can be read via the RHS website online³) and are unattributed to a site. Whilst Willis suggested that some of these payments at least might have been due to work at Battle (also owned by the Montagus at one time), it must be noted that Battle Abbey estate was sold in 1721 by the 6th Earl of Montagu, to Sir Thomas Webster and we have no landscape plan for Battle Abbey or any written record of any later association between the Websters and Brown. Of course one or more of Brown's predecessors could have advised or worked for the

Montagus at Battle prior to 1722, leaving traces of their landscaping, but not Brown, who was working on commissions much later (after the early 1750s at earliest). If Brown did advise Webster it remains a mystery.

Battle Abbey is in the ownership of English Heritage.

3. Brightling Park

The first known house on this site was built 1540-1561. The small estate was bought in 1684 by William Peake and after he died his sister sold it in 1697 to Thomas Fuller, a local industrialist. Thomas Fuller extended the estate to 95Ha (230 acres) and in about 1699 rebuilt the house. It passed in 1703 to his nephew John Fuller (1680–1745) who married Elizabeth Rose after whom Fuller renamed the house Rose Hill and added an additional 59Ha (145 acres). The name Brightling Park was readopted in 1979.

His son, John Fuller II (c 1705-1755), invested heavily on the house and its park and rebuilt and enlarged the house. He also purchased another 372ha (920 acres) of adjoining land and created a deer park around the new house. In 1747 he constructed a chain of five ponds, divided by a dam running down the centre of the park. Although of naturalistic style this work must have preceded Brown – who was only just married and at Stowe. When John Fuller II died the estate passed to his brother Rose Fuller (1708-77) then to Rose's nephew John III, known as "Honest Jack" or "Mad Jack" Fuller (1757-1834).

The tenure of Rose Fuller and the first few years of John III covers the period when Brown was active at Ashburnham (mid 1760s to 1781). Although there is no surviving evidence of an association between Rose Fuller and Brown it is curious to find that that Rose's niece Frances (b. 1753 – sister of John III Fuller and daughter of the Rev Henry Fuller who was brother of both John II and Rose) married a son of Capability Brown, Launcelot Brown junior, who had been born c.1748 at Stowe and was MP for Buckingham⁴. This was in 1784 – the year after Brown senior's death. They married in Lausanne, Switzerland. It is not impossible that they initially met at Ashburnham or Rose Hill.

However tenuously a social link can be made between Capability Brown and Rose Fuller there is no actual direct paper trail. There is no surviving plan and nothing in the accounts book or the bank records. The evidence we do have comes from a few years later in 1806 when John Fuller III commissioned another great landscape architect, Humphry Repton (1752-1818), to produce what was called a 'Red Book'. Repton's 'Red Books' (so called for their binding) had explanatory text and water colourings with overlays to show 'before' and 'after' views. His book for Brightling (ESRO ACC 2703) has some interesting phrases such as '*...some parts of Mr Brown's plan having been misunderstood*' and '*Mr Brown seems to have thought...*' and there is further critique of a Brown plan. This does seem to be good evidence that Capability Brown did draw up some plans for Brightling Park (Starr, A&J), if so they are lost. It also seems that some attempts were made to enact some of his ideas, but without

his supervision. Based on Repton's comments Phipps gives a 90% probability that Brown had been connected at some time with Rose Hill.

Mad Jack Fuller died in 1834 aged 77 and is buried in Brightling church yard in a self-designed pyramid, sitting at a table with port in hand.

Mad Jack's nephew Augustus Elliott inherited the estate and sold it to Percy Tew in 1879 who was succeeded by his son Thomas. Thomas died in WW2 and his wife Rosemary inherited the park subsequently marrying Michael Grissell. Brightling Park remains in the ownership of the Grissell family. The site is now used for training racehorses and horse trials and recently started an annual walled gardens music festival. Apart from these events and private hirings etc. there is generally no public access.

4. Ashburnham Place

In contrast to our doubts above there is absolutely no doubt that Brown undertook a major commission at Ashburnham Place for the 2nd Earl of Ashburnham.

In no way can it be attempted here to fully describe what Brown did at Ashburnham, for this the reader is directed to the specialist references, particularly to Hinze's review in 'Capability Brown in Sussex'⁵. Nor can the history of the Ashburnhams be covered in detail here, but a mainly later overview of this by Kiloh can be found in Section 'O' of this Collectanea, and it is extensively covered elsewhere. A very large and extensive archive from Ashburnham is held by ESRO and the National Archives description of this contains a useful synopsis of the family history⁶.

A 1638 landscape survey of Ashburnham by Anthony Everenden (ESRO ACC 2300/1/8) shows a typical Wealden arrangement of a large manor house south of the church, with some gardens and an orchard surrounded by woods, hop gardens and productive fields and with an approach across mill ponds to the south-west. This was produced around the time that John Ashburnham regained the estate, it having been sold by his father to William Relf in 1611 to pay off debts. He lost it again in 1643 during the Commonwealth as he was a loyal Royalist and the lands were sequestered, but Charles II restored the Ashburnham lands to the Ashburnhams at the Restoration in 1660.

The church was rebuilt by 1665 and a new house constructed 'not quite finished' in 1671 and letter evidence exists to show that there were some gardens. The new church now lay west of the new house. A map by Edward Elphick dated 1717 and a 1730 painting 'Prospect of Ashburnham Place Sussex' by Peter Tillemans exist and show details of a quite formal garden with varied geometric wide alleys between woodlands to the south of the house. There was likely to have been little change to these gardens, but some work to convert some woodlands to parkland by the time of Bishop Richard Pococke's visit in 1754 (he very briefly describes drives through the woodlands). This work on the woodlands appears confirmed in a map of 1766 (ESRO ASH 4470) which shows a new drive through woodlands to

the junction of Penhurst Lane with the main (A271) road. This was also connected across Penhurst Lane with a drive beyond the park across the wider estate's Beech Down Wood to cross Kane Hythe road (B2096) and eventually connect with the Flimwell to Hastings turnpike at Vines Cross (Yeakell and Gardner's map 'Sussex 1778-1783, 2 inches to 1 mile'⁷)

Capability Brown became involved with Ashburnham sometime in the mid 1760s, certainly before 1767. One of the minor positions the earl held at court between 1753-62 was Keeper of Hyde and St James Parks, which he relinquished only two years before Brown's appointment as Royal Gardener for Hampton Court and St James's. So the 2nd Earl had knowledge of Brown's work and indeed in 1758 had signed a petition to ask that Brown be given an appointment at Kensington Gardens.

The precise date of Brown's first tasks at Ashburnham is not clear but he produced a large detailed plan of about 4ft 2in x 6ft 3in [1.27m x 1.91m] dimensions at a very odd scale of about 1:1092 with 1 inch representing 91 feet [1cm = 10.92m] (ESRO ASH 4458). It showed the land to the north and south of the house all as parkland with belts and clumps of trees, a chain of three lakes, plus heavier woodland south of the lakes, with further afield to the east and north more open land rising towards the heavily wooded irregular ridge plateau between the Brede and Ashbourne/Wallers Haven watersheds. It also showed an intended walled garden, and amongst other proposed structures a bridge, new stables, an icehouse and menagerie. Brown also created a network of drives as the whole local estate at that time extended to around 3,237 Ha (8,000 acres) of which 90 Ha (220 acres) were gardens and pleasure grounds around the house and church.

Brown must have started some work before he received a first payment in 1767, which is dutifully recorded in his accounts book (see above). His account was settled with Earl Ashburnham in 1773, but it was re-opened a year later with a final payment in 1781. Overall he directly received £7196 1s 0d. In all a minimum of £16203 4s 3d was paid, including Brown's fees, plus to Brown's son-in-law the architect Henry Holland, to the decorative painter John Wateridge and the foreman Jonathan Midgeley. Using an historical inflation calculator this would represent £2.67M to £3M at 2017 prices.

Not all of Brown's design was completed by 1781, the pleasure grounds and 'Broad Water' were not completed until a few years after his death, but the walled garden was finished in 1783. The view northwards across the nearly completed Broad Water to the house in 1784 is shown below. Note the new trees!

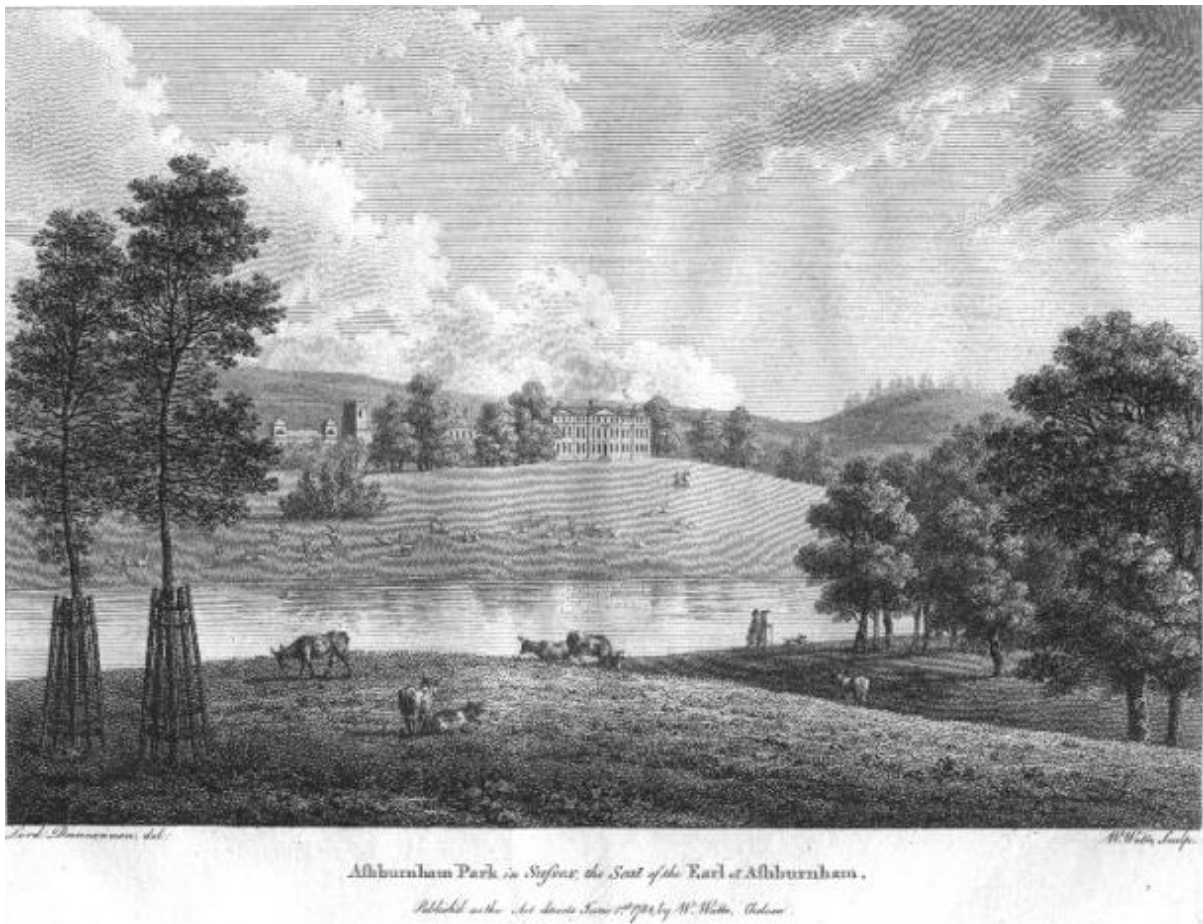
The house had several revisions in the years to come but the park landscape overall remains a relatively unaltered example of Brown's work. There is a small cascade between the upper and 'Front' lakes, and the wooden bridge built by Brown between 'Front Water' and 'Broad Water' was replaced by a stone one designed by George Dance (1741-1825) in 1813-15. The formal terraces around the house were also created by Dance in the style of Humphry Repton, but further modified in the late 19th century.

Some further landscaping changes were made in the mid to late 19th century, including some extension of Brown's pleasure grounds and building of structures within these, such as 'The Temple' which functioned as viewing points/shelters for those on a circuit of the grounds.

The 'Great Storm' of 1987 caused the loss of many 18th century and early 19th century trees but the present owners, the Ashburnham Christian Trust, actively manage the grounds and are conserving Brown's design.

The Orangery Tea Rooms can be visited by the public, but otherwise Ashburnham Place operates as a Christian facility for retreats, quiet days or holidays available for booking by individuals or groups of friends who wish to come to Ashburnham Place for a time of spiritual growth or relaxation. See their website for details.

The c.200Ha park at Ashburnham Place is listed Grade II*⁹, 110.7Ha of which is a listed Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)¹⁰.



Ashburnham Park: the house of 1757-61 in its new landscape setting by Capability Brown, depicted in 1784⁸.

Endnotes

1. A ha-ha is a recessed landscape design element that creates a vertical barrier while preserving an uninterrupted view of the landscape beyond.
2. See <https://www.rbs.com/heritage/use-our-archives.html>
3. At <https://www.rhs.org.uk/education-learning/libraries-at-rhs/collections/library-online/capability-brown-account-book>
4. See <http://johnmadjackfuller.homestead.com/FamilyConnections.html>
5. Copies can be ordered via www.sussexgardenstrust.org.uk/
6. <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/cd5601cb-9c82-49ff-9344-195ba272296a>
7. <http://www.envf.port.ac.uk/geo/research/historical/webmap/sussexmap/Yeakelllarge41.htm>
8. From: <http://landedfamilies.blogspot.fr/2015/>
9. <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1000145>
10. <https://necmsi.esdm.co.uk/PDFsForWeb/Citation/1001964.pdf>

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