



Capability Brown 2016 at Blenheim Palace

2016 marks the 300th anniversary of celebrated landscape gardener, Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown. Blenheim Palace is the best place to see the extraordinary vision and work of ‘Capability’ Brown in their 2000 acres of landscaped parkland, which the gardener spent 11 years creating.

It was his approach to present a landscape that appeared natural but was in fact 'nature contrived' that helped the Palace gain World Heritage Site status in 1987. The landscape setting he devised in the 1760's provided such a sublime form of beauty and harmony that every generation of the Marlborough family has endeavoured to preserve it.

Lord Randolph Churchill dubbed the ‘Capability’ Brown landscape at Blenheim Palace as “The finest view in England”. Many landscape historians also state that the landscaping at Blenheim Palace is the finest example of Brown’s work.

The 2,000 acre park delivers beauty across all seasons; from lawns brimming with daffodils in spring, greens of the trees transforming into a myriad of warm tones from summer to autumn, to the twinkling blanket of frost and mist rising from the lake in winter.

Brown’s style derived from the two practical principles of comfort and elegance. On the one hand there was a determination that everything should work, and that a landscape should provide for every need of the great house. On the other his landscapes had to cohere and look elegant.

While his designs have great variety, they also appear seamless, owing to his use of the sunk fence or ‘ha-ha’ to confuse the eye into believing that different pieces of parkland, though managed and stocked quite differently, were one. His expansive lakes, at different levels and apparently unconnected, formed a single body of water as if a river through the landscape, that like the parkland itself, ran on indefinitely.

Blenheim Palace has an exciting calendar of activity planned to celebrate the work of ‘Capability’ Brown in 2016, from specialist garden tours, a new temporary exhibition, self-guided trail and guided walks.

Opening in February 2016 is a new temporary exhibition that will share ‘Capability’ Brown’s work at Blenheim Palace across the 11 years he was commissioned (1763 – 1774) through detailed accounts of how he designed and executed such a masterpiece through photography, drawings, equipment and costumes with a selection of never-been-displayed-before elements, including Brown’s master plan.

There will be key vistas marked out at Blenheim Palace in 2016 in the ‘Capability’ Brown trail, to allow visitors to see the best examples of Brown’s designs around the Parkland.

Capability Brown at Blenheim Palace Facts

- Visitors can see over 2,000 acres of landscaped parkland
- The Parkland was landscaped from 1763 – 1774, instructed by 4th Duke of Marlborough
- Between 1764 and 1774 he was paid £16,437 and 14 shillings, however sometimes Brown would allow his clients to determine the value of his work rather than charge them with a bill.

- His trademark trees were Cedar & Lebanon amongst others - one of the Cedar trees planted by Brown had to be felled in 1949. It had a girth of 30 feet!
- His nickname came about for his common phrase – “This garden has capabilities to improve”.
- An interesting characteristic of this new style (which eventually led to its falling out of favour) is the absence of flowers. There was no place for them in this brave new world of vistas. They were banished back to the kitchen garden and allowed to stay only within a walled enclosure.
- Brown was known for his natural landscapes, but also his serpentine design. The lakes he designed always had waving irregular edges, rivers were encouraged – sometimes, compelled – to snake through the grounds. His water was never square or round, the shape was always sinewy.
- There was a smaller lake at Blenheim Palace before Brown arrived. It had been made on the orders of the Duchess at the same time as she had the canal system built under the bridge. This lake was on the Woodstock side of the bridge. The historian David Green, when researching his huge book on Blenheim Palace in the late 1940s ‘found Brown’s plan for the enlargement of the Lake in a chest at Blenheim Palace.’

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Notes to editors

Capability Brown

In 1764 Capability Brown was brought in by the 4th Duke to remodel the gardens and the Park. Brown landscaped the Park to create interesting and changing views around a new lake. Brown wanted to make a perfectly natural landscape but he did leave the two avenues of trees. He planted trees in clumps, apparently randomly but in fact they were planted so that the view of the Lake would alter as people moved around the Lake on horseback or in a carriage. In the Park he planted Beech and Cedar (Cedars of Lebanon and Atlas Cedars) and Horse Chestnut. He planted a belt of trees around the Park the idea being that the Duke would look out and see his Park surrounded by forest. The belt was 50 meters wide and largely made up of beech trees. He used conifers as nursery trees to encourage the beech trees to grow tall and straight. About $\frac{3}{4}$ of the belt survives. Beech trees are coming to the natural end of their lives and the belt is being replanted. Main problem with the replanting has been squirrels attacking the beech trees.

Almost every CB landscape has a water feature. At Blenheim Palace he dammed the Glyme River and over a year it filled up the Lake. CB built a cascade where the run off for the dam is. In the Cascade outcrops of rock were placed to make the water foam and create a noise. As you walk towards the cascade the path curves and you cannot see anything but just hear it. He was fond of putting in curved paths to get a nice surprise.

CB left the island in Queen Pool as a feature to show where the original causeway once was. It’s called Elizabeth Island because Elizabeth I was imprisoned in the Woodstock Manor for a year after Wyatt’s rebellion 1554.