

Capability Brown at Stowe



The Octagon Lake and Gothic Temple © National Trust Images

Early in his career Capability Brown created the magnificent Grecian Valley at Stowe, part of Viscount Cobham's ambitious landscape of classical buildings, rolling lawns and beautiful lakes. For ten years, Brown used his vision and technical knowledge to organise building in the park, including the Cobham Monument and Palladian Bridge. He planted thousands of trees and also oversaw work on the house.

Brown was 24 when he was appointed head gardener at Stowe in February 1741, taking charge of 40 men. By that time, Viscount Cobham had been combining his military and political career with work on the estate for 30 years. He employed leading architects and designers Sir John Vanbrugh, James Gibbs and Charles Bridgeman (1690-1738). Brown took over from William Love, who had supervised the forming of the Elysian Fields valley and Bridgeman's Eleven-Acre Lake.

After Bridgeman's retirement, landscape architect William Kent (1685-1748) continued work on the four temples – Venus, Contemplation, Ancient Virtue and British Worthies – and on making the landscape appear more natural. During the 1740s Kent provided designs for Stowe, while Brown managed day-to-day operations and probably added his own ideas.

National Trust: www.nationaltrust.org.uk/stowe

Particular thanks to Kellie Scott at Stowe

For more information about Brown and his work go to capabilitybrown.org/research



Capability Brown

Lancelot 'Capability' Brown (1716-1783) was born in the Northumberland village of Kirkharle, and went on to popularise the English landscape style, advising on over 250 large country estates throughout England and Wales.

Formal gardens gave way to naturalistic parkland of trees, expanses of water and rolling grass. He also designed great houses, churches and garden buildings, and was skilled in engineering, especially with water.

This guide was created as part of a festival celebrating the 300th anniversary of his birth. Find out more about the man and his work at capabilitybrown.org/research

Portrait of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, c.1770-75, by Richard Cosway (17421821)/Private Collection/Bridgeman Images.



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Grecian Valley

The influence of Brown's time at Stowe is most clearly seen in his work on the Grecian Valley, which lies to the north of the house. It was a huge engineering job to dig out the curved bowl, creating a valley with densely planted slopes. Brown's men had to move 18,350 cubic metres of earth, using spades, barrows and horse-drawn carts.

At the head of the valley Brown built the Temple of Concord and Victory, one of the largest of over 30 ornamental buildings in the gardens at Stowe. It acts as an eye-catcher from many points in the valley and also provides a viewing spot for visitors, with trees and shrubberies framing the views.

The plan was to create a lake in the Grecian Valley, but this proved beyond even Brown's skills as an engineer. Instead, it became a grass-covered amphitheatre, surrounded by sculptures and buildings. Linking these features was a series of perimeter walks, lined with shrubberies.

This was the last major work to be done during Lord Cobham's lifetime and may have been based on an idea by Kent. A letter from Brown to Lord Cobham, dated February 1746, suggests that "finishing the Head of the Oval [valley]" was a process that took many months, with much "talk and tryels" between the pair.



Grecian Valley © National Trust Images



Temple of Concord and Victory © National Trust Images

Cobham Monument

In 1747-48 Brown built the Cobham Monument, the huge Roman column 119 feet (30.5 metres) high, topped with a statue of Lord Cobham. The fluted stone column acted both as an eye-catcher, when viewed from the steps of the Temple of Concord, and as a belvedere (viewing point) on one of the highest points of the estate. After Lord Cobham's death in September 1749 it became his memorial.

It was the first such monument that Brown built and is thought to have been designed by James Gibbs. Brown appears to have added his own touches, writing in a letter of October 1750: "the Pillar with its Capitel and Bace are the Tuscan Proportion, but of difert [different] members which I composed to make it more monumental and to answer the octangular forme of ye Pillar."



Aerial view showing planting and the Cobham monument © National Trust Images

Tree moving

William Kent had begun the process of naturalising the style of tree planting at Stowe, which had been laid out in semi-formal plantations and groves. One of Brown's major contributions was the planting of thousands more trees, mainly elm, beech and Scots pine.

The accounts show that large limes and elms were among the trees moved from other parts of the estate, including the Grecian Valley. Typically, Brown's solution to this weighty job was to use a tree carriage to lever them out of the earth and move them to where they could be replanted.

Brown may have planted the huge London plane that still stands at the far end of the Grecian Valley.

Building work at Stowe

Brown was in charge of paying not just the under-gardeners at Stowe but also the carpenters, masons and craftsmen working on the house and other buildings.

The accounts show that in 1742-43 Brown was ordering stone from three different quarries and overseeing masons working in the library and chapel at the house, on the Palladian Bridge, on a grotto and James Gibbs' Gothic and Lady's Temples. Building was also in progress on the stables and coach-houses.

During the mid 1740s Brown was also educating himself about the language of architecture and how to draw up plans. In 1747 he was working on a "plan of the Long Room" for Lord Cobham. His landscape designs show that he must have been influenced by seeing many of William Kent's drawings while they were both working at Stowe.



The Palladian Bridge © National Trust Images

Capability Brown at Stowe



Capability Brown features

- 1 Statues along Paddock Course Walk
- 2 Temple of Concord and Victory
- 3 Queen's Temple
- 4 Lord Cobham's Pillar
- 5 Grotto
- 6 Gothic Temple
- 7 Temple of Ancient Virtue
- 8 Temple of British Worthies
- 9 Palladian Bridge
- 10 Temple of Friendship

★ Eye-catcher

↑ Viewpoint

~ Ha-ha

🌳 Specimen trees

🌲 Woodland or copse

🌳 Parkland trees

🌱 Shrubbery

i Visitor Centre

☕ Refreshments

🚻 Toilets

P Parking

400 yards

400 metres

Launching Brown's career

It was at Stowe that Brown was able to marry and start a family. He and Bridget Wayet were wed on 22 November 1744, at St Mary's church on the estate. They are thought to have met in Lincolnshire, where Brown worked before coming to Stowe. Bridget's family were based in Boston.

The couple made their home in the Boycott Pavilion and had four children whilst at Stowe. Bridget married Henry Holland Junior, (later Brown's architectural partner); Lancelot Junior became an MP and later worked as Gentleman of the King's Privy Chamber. John became an Admiral in the Navy and William was born and died in 1750.

Lord Cobham sometimes loaned Brown out to work on other estates. After his employer's death, Brown began to take on his own jobs outside the estate, building his reputation as an independent landscape designer. By the time he left Stowe in the autumn of 1751, Brown had a network of important contacts to add to the artistic vision, technical knowledge and business skill that had made him so successful.



The East Lake pavilion © National Trust Images & Andrew Butler

Biodiversity at Stowe

At Stowe the parkland supports a variety of habitats including wood pasture and parkland, ancient woodland, deciduous woodland, mixed broadleaved and coniferous woodland and habitats associated with the lake.

Stowe today

Following the death of Lord Cobham, his nephew Richard Grenville, Earl Temple, continued to remodel the house and gardens, though in a more Classical style. Architects Robert Adam and Sir John Soane both worked at Stowe after Brown.



Oxford bridge © National Trust Images & Andrew Butler

The estate remained in the Temple family until 1921, when the house became Stowe School. In 1989 the National Trust took over most of the garden and much of the parkland. Brown's Grecian Valley, with its circular walks and glorious views, remains one of the great attractions of Stowe. Visitors can also take an introductory tour of the estate which gives an overview of one of the grandest of English gardens.