

Remembering the genius of Britain's 'greatest gardener'

CULTURE

Special to The Globe and Mail

Published Thursday, Feb. 25, 2016 10:01AM EST

Last updated Thursday, Feb. 25, 2016 1:54PM EST

Lancelot 'Capability' Brown was one of the most celebrated landscape architects of the 18th century.



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ighteen-century poet Richard Owen Cambridge once wrote of landscape architect Lancelot 'Capability' Brown: "I earnestly hope I die before you. I should like to see heaven before you had improved it."

It's been 300 years since the birth of the illustrious gardener, but his legacy – articulately summed up by Owen's colourful quote – lives on. Perhaps the greatest gardener in British history, his influential works

still endure and can be found peppered throughout its green and pleasant land.



Portrait of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, c.1770-75, by Richard Cosway (1742- 1821)/Private Collection/Bridgeman Images.

On the occasions of Brown's anniversary, many of his greatest living creations will be back in focus this year as the country celebrates his life and work.

Well-known works include the impressive manor of Lord Harewood, Harewood House near Leeds, Yorkshire. This estate boasts 1,000-acres of Brown-designed landscape that is still intact. Brown's vision of a truly immense scale transformed the landscape from functional farmland into a dreamy, unblemished panorama later captured by the likes of artist J. M. W. Turner and photographer Roger Fenton.

Another famous estate complete with legendary Brownian landscape is Charlecote Park, near Stratford-upon-Avon. Here, Brown designed a large deer park behind the magnificent Tudor mansion built by Sir Thomas Lucy, where to this day a herd of deer still roam. Legend has it that local lad William Shakespeare was once caught poaching deer on the Charlecote Estate.

Lancelot Brown was born in Kirkharle, Northumberland, the fifth child of a land agent and a chambermaid; he began his career as a mere gardener's boy at Sir William Loraine's kitchen garden at Kirkharle Hall, eventually working his way up to the role of head gardener of Lord Cobham at Stowe House, Buckinghamshire – one of the chicest gardens of the time.

At Stowe, Brown served under one of the forefathers of the new English style gardening, William Kent. Though hired for the execution of Kent's designs, Lord Cobham permitted Brown to take on side work for his aristocratic friends. This proved the gateway to success for Brown as he ventured on to his own gardening practice in London.

View more from Capability Brown:





Brown acquired his unusual nickname from his habit of telling his clients that their land had great “capabilities”. He was a ruthlessly efficient designer and would often ride around an estate on horseback to assess its capabilities, then rough out a design within an hour.

So prevalent was his popularity amid the aristocracy at the time that it was more difficult to find a

prominent British estate that did not have a garden planned by the famous landscape designer.

During Brown's 32-year reign at the top of his profession, his consultancy is thought responsible for more than 250 commissioned land-overhauls across the British Empire. Much to the scorn of some, he often chose to do away with previous garden works, preferring to sweep away the past and begin anew.



RICHARD JOHN JONES/VISITENGLAND

Capability Brown was commissioned in 1761 by the 4th Duke to transform the gardens at Chatsworth House in Derbyshire.

It was Brown's forte to bring out the inherent beauty of any landscape, and he limited himself to freeform shapes and natural elements of turf, trees, and water - though they were so carefully contrived there was nothing natural about them.

A master of proportion and scale, Brown sought balance between his proprietor's enormous residences and the surrounding lands. His park-like method included large-scale land contouring and incorporated undulating grassland sprinkled with thoughtfully placed trees and winding pathways - all placed precisely to accentuate particular views.

He would craft protective bands of woodland on an estate's perimeter and create enormous lagoons that reflected the scenery like a mirror. Sometimes bridges, buildings or other significant structures were also included. To ensure design unity, Brown eventually became a capable architect as well.



BLenheim PALACE/VISITENGLAND

Blenheim Palace from across the lake with the Grand Bridge.

Apart from iconic works such as Charlecote, some of Brown's other must-see gardens include Blenheim Palace, the magnificent estate in Woodstock, Oxfordshire, home of the dukes of Marlborough and birthplace of Winston Churchill; and Chatsworth House in Derbyshire, a 105-acre estate that incorporates much of his work along with other important landscape designers.

MORE INFO?

More info about the festivities and the many garden tours taking place can be found at www.capabilitybrown.org

Brown's illustrious career reached its pinnacle when he was appointed Master Gardener to King George III at Hampton Court Palace in 1761 - although he continued with private commissions to a lesser degree until his end. He died in London in 1783, leaving behind a legacy to the British countryside and to landscape architects worldwide.

2016 marks a special year for Brown devotees, as they gather together at Britain's own 'Capability Brown Festival' celebrating the 300th anniversary of his birth. This first-ever nationwide celebration offers visitors a first-hand tour of his many legendary landscapes. Some estates have been transformed into luxury hotels for those who prefer an overnight pause to breathe in the idyllic scenery and contemplate nature, as was Brown's original intent.

This article was written by Melanie Rekola, a landscape designer and gardening writer based in Barrie, Ont.

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