AMPTHILL PARK

AN ILLUSTRATED GUIDE
INTRODUCTION TO AMPTHILL

John FitzPatrick, the 2nd Earl of Upper Ossory, was born in 1745 and succeeded his father to the earldom in 1758. He was a minor political figure, being elected to the House of Commons in 1767, and was made Lord Lieutenant of Bedfordshire in 1771.

His wife, Anne Liddell, was seven years older than him and was the daughter of the first and last Baron of Ravensworth. She had previously married the 3rd Duke of Grafton in 1756 and they had three children together. In 1764 the Duke tired of her party-going lifestyle and they separated.

He then, as Prime Minister, set up house with the notorious courtesan Nancy Parsons. It was the discovery of this affair, which was seemingly an open secret in London, which pushed the Duchess into the position in which she took a lover herself. In the summer of 1767 she met the Earl of Ossory in Brighton and their affair over the autumn and winter led to her becoming pregnant.

This gave the Duke the ammunition to divorce her and a great scandal ensued. The Ossorys married two weeks after the divorce bill was passed in parliament in 1769. Under the circumstances the couple were not received in London, and spent most of their time in the country. Horace Walpole remained a loyal friend and correspondent of the Countess and was a guest at Ampthill. The time they spent in the country may account for the unusual complexity of the landscaping here.

Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown was their chosen designer or ‘place-maker’ and we know that he had at least two substantial commissions at Ampthill. The first may have started in 1770, ran until the end of 1772 and cost £1,596.09.07d. The second ran from 1773-1775 and cost at least £800.00.00d. It is notoriously difficult to give such sums modern values, but you can get a sense of the scale of his operations here by multiplying these figures by 500. We do not have a plan of Brown’s work here and the first accurate record we have of the landscape after he had finished is an estate plan drawn some 50 years later. It is by no means unusual for there to be as little evidence as this for what Brown did at a site. Very frequently we can only ascribe plantings and details of the design to Brown on the basis of similar work that we have recorded at other landscapes attributed to him.

Just because there is so seldom evidence for his guiding hand in a project, it would be a mistake to regard Brown as a tradesman, brought in to do the bidding of his clients. He was very highly regarded in his profession by 1770, the likely time of the first commission at Ampthill, and if the Earl had not wanted his guidance, he would not have employed him.

In each case we show a recommended route round the site, which takes in a number of key-points. There will be a one-page description of some aspect of the design at each of these key-points.

You should not feel obliged to take the recommended route, but the key-points are set out in the order in which we recommend visiting them and the text is designed to be read in that order. The set route makes it possible to build a narrative that is carried forward from point to point and give the booklets a greater overall coherence.

The booklets have a single overall editor, they make a series and are collectible in their own right.

THE INTENTION OF THE BOOKLETS

Two booklets will be helpful for your site visits.

The first has a series of plans showing all the landscapes that we have attributed to Brown, a glossary of terms used in the individual site booklets, a short biography of Brown, and an introductory field guide to some of the basic ingredients of his style and to his working methods.

The second are a series of individual guides to each of the Brown landscapes that is opening to celebrate the tercentenary in 2016. Each of these booklets touches on the documentation for Brown’s work at the site, and on his treatment of landform, trees, water, views, buildings and farming there, and cross-refers to other places where there are similar examples of each of these elements.

It would be very easy to write an entire book on the history of each landscape, and in many cases this has been done. These booklets however concentrate on the underlying designs. They essentially provide a field guide, to help you to read the design of the landscape as you go round it, together with sufficient background information to enable you to converse authoritatively with anyone you may meet on your stroll.
Brown was often, though unfairly, accused of planting trees in random mixes. The use of juxtaposed bands of planting, each made up of a single species, or of a mix of a similar group of species, is unusual however. The most interesting aesthetic theory of his day concerning what to plant where, was aerial perspective. To that end broad-leaved trees were classified by leaf colour from the palest (London plane, birch, lime) through to the darkest (Copper beech and Holm oak).

The idea, which was drawn from the Italian painting tradition, being that darker trees could provide chiaroscuro in the foreground, and the lighter ones would make objects seem further away. By planting dark-coloured trees in the middle of a clump, one could also, according to Brown’s admirer, William Marshall, render ‘the recess dark, to throw it into shadow, and by giving a degree of lustre to the projection, give variety at least, if not picturable effect’.

While his successor, Humphry Repton did make use of this theory, it is less clear that Brown did. Instead, while each of the clumps at Ampthill uses bands of planting, the arrangement of the bands is different. Repton would have regarded the final effect as ‘cheerful’, and it helped to create the ‘riant’ rather playful atmosphere of the Upper Park.

This key point is in some disarray, which gives us the opportunity to see how it was put together without being distracted by what usually bedevils any attempt to understand Brown – the fact that his work all looks so natural that it is difficult to distinguish from Nature.

There are several things to note. First, the path that most people use to get here has not been levelled across, and rises up and down as it crosses the ground. Those two facts tell us that it is not Brown’s.

There must have been a drive somewhere near this knoll, and the earthworks suggest that one may run off to the north-east from its south side. From that one might imagine a walk climbing up to the knoll, though it would be hard to spot today, with all the wear and tear on the path that is currently used.

This casting around for earthworks though shows up another very slight bank facing out towards the house. These straight-edged battered slopes give an indication of the direction of the principal view, which seems therefore to have been towards the house.

Second, there is some interesting tree planting immediately to the north-west. This consists of two rows of lime trees planted at quite regular intervals close to the foot of the slope, a collection of pine trees half way down the slope, and some apple trees at the top, though not many now survive.

Brown was often, though unfairly, accused of planting trees in random mixes. The use of juxtaposed bands of planting, each made up of a single species, or of a mix of a similar group of species, is unusual however. The most interesting aesthetic theory of his day concerning what to plant where, was aerial perspective. To that end broad-leaved trees were classified by leaf colour from the palest (London plane, birch, lime) through to the darkest (Copper beech and Holm oak).

The idea, which was drawn from the Italian painting tradition, being that darker trees could provide chiaroscuro in the foreground, and the lighter ones would make objects seem further away. By planting dark-coloured trees in the middle of a clump, one could also, according to Brown’s admirer, William Marshall, render ‘the recess dark, to throw it into shadow, and by giving a degree of lustre to the projection, give variety at least, if not picturable effect’.

While his successor, Humphry Repton did make use of this theory, it is less clear that Brown did. Instead, while each of the clumps at Ampthill uses bands of planting, the arrangement of the bands is different. Repton would have regarded the final effect as ‘cheerful’, and it helped to create the ‘riant’ rather playful atmosphere of the Upper Park.

This planting is very ambitious and large in scale – the screen of limes runs for over 100 yards, and measuring from the top of the knoll to the foot of the slope, the planting design is over 75 yards deep. One should see the limes as a curtain across the west side, running far enough east to conceal Park Farm.

These direct us towards the house where the view is broken by the tops of a row of oaks planted along the edge of a small pond at the foot of the slope. One might suppose that the trees were planted by the water to provide holts or hiding places for fish around their roots. The row is itself an odd detail, but it does occur elsewhere in Brown’s work – at Doddington, Cheshire and at Moccas Court, for example.

As for the role of these oaks in the wider canvas of the park, they are full-grown but they still barely screen the house, which they could easily have done had they been planted further up the slope, to the south. The answer seems to be that they were planted to give a narrow peep to the house, which would appear completely unplanned.

This key point is in some disarray, which gives us the opportunity to see how it was put together without being distracted by what usually bedevils any attempt to understand Brown – the fact that his work all looks so natural that it is difficult to distinguish from Nature.

There are several things to note. First, the path that most people use to get here has not been levelled across, and rises up and down as it crosses the ground. Those two facts tell us that it is not Brown’s.

There must have been a drive somewhere near this knoll, and the earthworks suggest that one may run off to the north-east from its south side. From that one might imagine a walk climbing up to the knoll, though it would be hard to spot today, with all the wear and tear on the path that is currently used.

This casting around for earthworks though shows up another very slight bank facing out towards the house. These straight-edged battered slopes give an indication of the direction of the principal view, which seems therefore to have been towards the house.

Second, there is some interesting tree planting immediately to the north-west. This consists of two rows of lime trees planted at quite regular intervals close to the foot of the slope, a collection of pine trees half way down the slope, and some apple trees at the top, though not many now survive.
THE BEECH & CHESTNUTS

Amphill is a great place to see ‘clumps on lumps’ – or tree-planting on knolls. The most famous examples in his own day were Petworth and Moor Park. Horace Walpole said of the latter that he had ‘undulated the horizon in so many artificial molehills, that it is full as unnatural as if it was drawn with a rule and compasses’.

The clump here is made up of beech trees with sweet chestnuts outside them, making the inside of the clump lighter than the outside. It looks as though the planting may have been more or less formally designed within a fence, with chestnuts planted along the straight edge of the fence. We should not be surprised to see organised planting in Brown’s work. At Warwick Castle, to give another example, Lord Brooke wrote in 1766: ‘I have undone many things he [Brown] left me as I thought looking formal in the planting way, ever making Round clumps that merit nothing but being very tame indeed’.

The earthwork of a path running through the clump between the beeches and sweet chestnuts has survived. This is a very slight ditch along the north side of the knoll, picked out by dead leaves and moss. It is a spur path, so one would have had to walk out and return along it, and its line suggests that the primary view was not out towards the house, but east towards the Standing.

Tents were very commonly put up for the summer in Brown’s landscapes, and were much loved by the children of the house, as Frederick Robinson (aged 8) wrote to his uncle from Wrest after his Grandmama had bought the children fishing rods ‘we go to that sport every fine day. We get up in the morning about half an hour after six. We have got a new tent which we set in every day when it is fine.’

This tower-like building of the Tudors would have appeared above the fringe of oaks that runs along the west side of Laurel Wood.

We might also be guided by the earthworks here to the exact place to stand: each of the knolls at Amphill has a roughly flattened top with a slight circular depression in it. These might be the holes left by falling trees, but they crop up so consistently that it is tempting to suppose that they survive from some temporary structures, such as tents, put up at these key-points every summer. The view would presumably have been composed to be seen through the opening of the tent.

The view out might have been intentionally mediaeval, based on the Standing, with a glimpse into the North Park – a view in which Park House and Park Farm were screened out by the trees on the clump, and one saw only the hunting tower, and the spread of ancient oak and elm pollards running away into the indeterminate distance.

1. Devis painted the tent at Studley Royal. On top of a hill near Fountains Abbey, it was both something to be seen and to see from.
THE BELT & RUSSETT’S PLANTATION

Brown’s more elaborate designs have two rides, one in grass, running just in front of the woodland belt (there is a good example at Croome), and one in gravel within the belt (because grass would not last under the trees).

These were designed for summer and winter outings, respectively. They were to be traversed by carriage and were used to provide air and exercise by the elderly, by young children, by invalids and by pregnant women. They could be lightly built because they were not in constant use.

To judge by what survives at other of Brown’s belts, at Aynho and Wimpole for example, one would expect the planting to have been complex and to have used a range of different species. The gaps in the pleasure ground belt at Croome which show off views from the house to the Malvern hills give a good idea of the level of control that could be exercised in varying the height of trees in a belt.

When one thinks of the time it has taken for these plantings to begin to threaten the views from the knolls, one can only marvel at the longevity that Brown built into his landscapes.

A ride threads its way through the southern belt, between the sports pitches and the road, and this is a distinct type of route construction.

A pair of linear earthworks can still be traced through the belt south of the football ground, and the ride is at the foot of the southern one. This earthwork would have been planted with trees and shrubs, and one would judge that there were no views from the ride into the parkland or the arable field where the sports pitches are.

Brown’s woodland belts might be regarded as his most complex planting designs, apart from flower gardens. This one is no exception. From a distance one might judge the whole belt to have been continuously planted with forest trees and conifers, and the earthwork comes and goes, and this in itself suggests a certain variety in the planting.

The ground is shown as having been wooded from Brown’s day on, but we do not know from the maps or from the surviving trees what was planted there or how high it was grown. Our best evidence for the design comes from the knolls in the Upper Park which were developed as viewpoints. Once we know which of the town’s buildings figured in the views from each of these points, we will be able to work out which of the trees in the belt have now too high.

1. George Medland’s painting of the Palladian Bridge at Stowe, shows a party of ladies out for a drive.

2. Even on this unsophisticated 19th century estate plan, the belt curves away from and towards the ride, suggesting the intricacy of the design.
THE CHESTNUTS

This clump has much that is unexpected in it. It is composed of sweet chestnuts, and these are planted in an essentially formal design, something one would not expect from Brown.

An unusually large number of sweet chestnuts found their way into the planting mix at Ampthill. They may have been used because deer like the nuts, but there are three small clumps of them along the south edge of the ridge. Why they were chosen and why the clumps in those cases are so small remains a mystery.

The drive along the Great Terrace runs some 50 yards north of the clump, along the edge of the north-facing slope. From this a straight path runs at right angles towards the middle of the clump, its earthwork, a very slight linear depression can easily be followed at its north end and then it disappears.

For one section it looks as though there is a second similar slight ditch on the east side of the first but that is an illusion. The earth from the walk has been downcast onto its east side (the left side as you are walking towards the clump) so as to hide the surface of the walk from the east, and this gives the odd effect. Confusingly there is a third earthwork further to the east, which is unrelated to the walk.

In fact all the walks at Ampthill are spurs like this. Dynefwr is exceptional among Brown’s designs in having a walk that makes a circuit around the park.

The largest of a group of twentieth century oaks is growing at the centre point of the Brownian clump. From here the sweet chestnuts might be thought of as a series of arches, like a portico around a building, with a whole series of vignettes over the town of Ampthill. These are now obscured by the chestnuts themselves, and blocked by the peripheral planting along the road, though there are still good views of the football and cricket pitches, apparently a ploughed field in Brown’s day.

In most of the Ampthill clumps the trees are planted on the side of the knoll rather than on its top. This was done to combat something that Humphry Repton, Brown’s successor, described as the browsing line. No trees in deer parks have branches below about two metres from the ground because the deer eat all the lower foliage. On flat ground this creates a line, running parallel to the ground, which becomes distracting once one starts to notice it. If the trees had been planted on top of the knolls, then one would have seen their clear stems when looking up to the knolls from below, and any impression that the trees might be, as it were, part of the knoll, so increasing its scale and size, would be lost. Instead the emphasis of the knoll would be diminished with a series of lollipops like a poodle’s pom-poms growing on it. Where, as here, the trees are planted on the slopes of the knoll, the stems of the trees at the top are hidden by those planted lower down, and so trees and slope are knit together.

So if we imagine all the trees that we see today with all their branches removed to around two metres, then the series of small-scale view, or vignettes, out from the top of the knoll will be reopened. There are fine examples of this practice at a large scale at Aston Park, Yorkshire.
Standing here, at the mediaeval heart of the park, it is worth considering that for all that 600 years of investment and development, the landscape today bears so strongly the mark of one man, Lancelot Brown, and one short period of its history, from 1770 – 1775.

One factor in the creation of his design will have been the unusual situation of his clients at Ampthill, but we should also reflect on how well the place would have suited his own inclinations.

Katherine’s Cross was put up 1771 in a place suggested by the Duchess of Grafton’s great friend, Horace Walpole, who also provided plans for a garden. His cross commemorated one greatly wronged divorcée, and the duchess may have taken this as a compliment, for her own situation was not a happy one.

Horace Walpole commented in the same year that ‘Katherine of Arragon lived sometime there. Nothing remains of the castle, nor any marks of residence, but a very small bit of her garden’. There are several places where a garden might have survived, the most likely of which is probably the Quince Tree Pond at the bottom of Primrose Hill. What is extraordinary is that despite the many vicissitudes of history, part of the sixteenth century royal garden was still sufficiently valued to have survived.

We know that Brown planted conifers around this cross. These had already gained Gothic, and hence mediaeval overtones – round-crowned, broad-leaved trees like oak and sycamore were reckoned more suitable to neo-classical buildings.

1. Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown (1716-1783) Gardener and Place-maker to Royalty and the Discerning
THE GRAND OVER-LOOK

‘Natural terraces’, as they were known were fundamental to Brown’s design. There is a good example at Warwick Castle, where Philip Yorke described the ‘Walk regularly Planted round the Brow’, as a ‘natural terrace’, from which ‘the prospect extends itself into the country as far as Gloucestershire’.

These terraces take their line from the point at which the shape of the ground changes, from the convex hill-top to the concave valley, so they run just below the crown of the hill. They are grassed, they run along the contour, and they are generally used as drives.

The natural terrace offers a variety of views and a degree of shelter from the wind, while its wandering line helps to define the topography without drawing attention to itself. It does for landscape what eye-liner does for the face. Among the best examples are Burton Pynsent and Kelston Hall, but not forgetting on a smaller scale, the pleasure grounds at Eaton Hall and Burgate.

Views were described in different ways, depending partly on their location. Generally speaking a ‘prospect’ was from the top of a hill, or a church tower. One was too high up for any effective landscaping to be done, and since there could be no effective display of taste from a prospect, these were thought rather vulgar. A ‘panorama’ – the word only came into use after Brown’s day – was the extensive view that one might get from a natural terrace. This was also regarded as vulgar, but it could be broken up into a series of smaller views, or ‘vignettes’ – again the word became popular after Brown’s day – either by tree planting or by the columns of a portico. Then there was the view proper, such as we have here, and finally the ‘peep’ – usually a glimpse of something through the trees.

Park House, which we see from this key-point, was designed by Brown’s contemporary, Sir William Chambers. However this was not the first house on the site. The earlier building may have been a lodge, designed to be out of sight of the castle, which stood south of the Great Terrace.

This is the grandest view at Ampthill, with Park House tucked down on the right. From here one can see the challenge for Brown, that far from commanding the landscape at Ampthill, the house is more or less out of sight of it. Its secluded situation made it difficult for him to design a great setting for the house, but it did enable him to include it as an eye-catching feature in his compositions from the top of the ridge.

One can see from here the way in which he combined landform, and planting. The topography is simple but sinuous, offering an amphitheatrical bowl with the house on the right hand side at the bottom. The planting on each side of the view frames the picture, partly hiding the house, without obscuring the various shifts and falls of the topography. So the landform itself turns towards Park Farm at the south end of the slope (as it enters the field with the Dexter cattle in), but the view is carried on to the north by the tree planting.

It is a fantastic composition, and the presence of the birch and scrub growth does nothing to take away from its grandeur. It only adds to its success that this valley and its trees play a significant part in several other key views.

The view-point itself stands at the east end of the Great Terrace which runs east from the Katherine Cross. This is an earthwork with its origins in the mediaeval castle. At intervals, as here, it has a well-defined edge, but in other sections it waves about a bit, and this variety makes the terrace invisible from below.

1. Although the ground is flatter in this picture, Gainsborough used the same mix of trees and topography to frame and give distance to his views. Here the landform appears to be moving away to the right, but the trees focus the eye on the distant hill in the middle of the picture.

Thomas Gainsborough ‘Wooded landscape with Peasants in a Country Waggon’, 1759-1762 (Tate)
THE HORSE PONDS

Brown was said to require ‘that every thing which indicated decay should be removed’. According to the aesthetes of the picturesque movement he ‘destroyed in Blenheim park, and many other places, great numbers of the finest studies for art that nature ever produced.’

However his was not a blind aversion: he often found himself working on a park that was scattered with abandoned pollard trees. Wakefield Lodge and Haynes are examples, like Ampthill, where he retained pollards on level ground on one side of the house, as if he found their forest-like character appropriate to flat country.

It would be reasonable to conclude that Brown, as much as Repton, associated pollards with mediaeval wood pasture, and was pleased for parkland to look like a clearing within a forest.

The West Approach, where we are standing, provided a relatively ornamental route to the house from the public road. In Brown’s day a sequence of ponds made its way from this point to Park Farm and then on to form part of the boundary of the North Park. The West Approach ran between two of them (the Horse Ponds).

On the south side, looking towards the Upper Park, there will have been clearings with relativelyformless boundaries, and with clumps of trees planted on knolls and promontories, and the intricacy of the design on the slope is flattened (it is always more interesting to look along a slope, rather than directly across its contours).

On the north side of the approach there will have been the single oaks and ancient pollards of the North Park. Pollards are trees regularly cut above the point where the new shoots could be reached by an animal. Most are likely to have been oak, but there will also have been elm, thorn, maple and ash. Many survived into the 1950s.

Brown devoted himself to making the join between the two kinds of landscape invisible – so here, the open glades at the foot of the hill make a break between the clumped trees of the Upper Park and the single ‘dotted’ trees of the North Park. The West Approach runs between the two, and it would not have been easy for visitors to see the two styles juxtaposed.

1. Rather than show off the main façade of the house, the approach comes in on the west side. This was because Brown had what his successor Humphry Repton described as an ‘aversion of showing a road’. He did not object to the traffic on a road, but would go to great lengths to avoid showing its surface in views from the windows of the house. There are good examples of his success in so doing at Blenheim, Castle Ashby and King’s Weston.

For Brown it was far more important that the road should be hidden in views from the house, than that there should be a good view from it to the house (his successor, Humphry Repton, held the opposite opinion). His roads therefore usually came in to the corner of the building, or, as here, crossed its axis, which meant that a great length of the surface could be hidden by a few well-placed trees.

The West Approach is carried on a raised causeway here. This may partly have been designed to keep it dry, but Brown also used raised causeways as a way of hiding the surface. Dynevor has an excellent example of this. In going to other view-points around the park one should keep a look out for this approach and take a note of how little of it is visible.

2. The ponds that ran from here to Park Farm were presumably mediaeval fish-ponds in origin. They may still have been used for fish in Brown’s day, but his aim will have been to give the impression from certain points around the park that there was a river running through it, intermittently glimpsed through the trees. Water could also, as here, be made into an elegant boundary by providing it with a vertical edge. This prevents stock from wading in, and cattle and deer will not willingly jump into water if they cannot see the bottom. The practice is ubiquitous in Brown’s work. Like Ampthill, Kirtlington and Flambards also have lakes on the park boundary.

3. Brown is very often accused of making private kingdoms for his clients, surrounded by thick belts of trees so that no-one could see in. As a matter of fact this is nonsense, but here it is worth emphasising the effect of the single oaks on the view north – rather than coming to an abrupt stop at a belt of trees, the parkland faded gently into the countryside beyond the Long Pond. Youingsbury has an excellent example of ‘fade’ like this, but it can also be seen at Stowe and elsewhere.

4. Pollards are admired today for their antiquity and for the richness of their natural history. But in the 18th century the consensus among farmers and agriculturists was that pollards were bad, should not be grown and should never be encouraged.

They were a waste of timber, and they were unnatural. Even in 1864 they could be described as not ‘trees at all, but strange, fantastic vegetable abortions ... no more nature’s notion of primeval woodland than are closely cropped hair and shaven lip and chin her intention for the real expression of the human face.’

Ampthill still has a few surviving pollards on the edge of the parkland, where they could give preliminary bulk to his new belts of woodland. Heveningham has good examples of this effect.
Brown made five kinds of routes within his landscapes: ridings, rides, approaches, drives, walks. Each is constructed in a different way for a different purpose and all five can be found at Ampthill.

While the riding runs outside the parkland, the approach runs between the public road and the house and has to be solid enough to carry heavy ox-carts and ‘carriages of burthen’. The ride runs around the perimeter of the parkland so as to provide as long a circuit as possible in protected ground, and the walk – a very slight linear depression, a few inches deep at the most, and only three to four feet across – is almost always a spur between the drive and a view-point.

The drive itself runs across the parkland, is grassed, and is created with a minimum of earth-moving. It is designed for summer use with a carriage and has to have an even cross-section and even gradients as far as possible. The pleasure of driving across smooth grass is not to be underestimated. So Edmund Burke compared beauty to ‘being swiftly drawn in an easy coach, on a smooth turf, with gradual ascents and declivities’, and Dr Johnson, not to be outdone, defined happiness as ‘being swiftly drawn in a chaise over undulating turf in the company of a beautiful and witty woman’. Public roads, before the advent of turnpikes, were quite impossible. Horace Walpole was ‘thrice overturned’ in 1749 on the ‘Alpine mountains’ of the Sussex roads.

The deer would then have had access to the whole park, while the farm animals could be confined in the different fields within the park. The planting in the Upper Park is characterised by clumps spread relatively evenly over the ground. Brown was famous for his clumps, though as a matter of fact they do not play a part in many of his designs.

A great number of trees had been felled during the civil war, 100 years earlier. More may have been tidied away by Brown himself, since he did not like pollards. Although he used clumps at Ampthill more or less as one might have used buildings in some landscapes, we should bear in mind the possibility that he chose clumps here because it would have been more expensive to plant single trees with deer still in the park.

Brown would normally have preferred to move them out, at least while the trees were young, as he did at Luton Hoo, to his contemporary Mrs Delany’s displeasure: ‘It would be better if Mr. Brown had not turned all the deer out of the park.’

Here we are standing at a crossroads between two drives, one of which, running out to the west, has clearly been abandoned as it runs straight into a thicket of silver birch.

One can also see at Ampthill how the earth that was dug out to level off the drive has been left in heaps on one side or the other. This was done so as to hide the surface of the drive, and so lay emphasis on the untouched naturalness of the topography. The more pronounced drive, running east-west, is ‘downcast’, that is, the earth has been piled on the south, downhill side. There are examples of this everywhere in Brown’s work, but the drive by the lake at Ripley comes to mind. The earth itself was left ‘tumbled’ rather than smoothed out: ‘low but extended hillocks’ were reckoned to conceal the earthwork, and the drive, better than ‘an uniformly continued line’.

The Great Park at Ampthill readily divides into three. What you see on top of the hill and on its slopes is the Upper Park. The North Park lies between Park House and the railway, and the third area, Primrose Hill, is on the east side of the Lime Walk. Upper Park runs from east to west along a spine of land with views over Ampthill to the south and the Vale of Bedford to the north. In Brown’s day one would expect the park to have been divided up by stock fences.
THE LAKE VIEW

This 19th century painting is almost too good to be true, because it seems to have been painted at this very viewpoint, set just below the Great Terrace, a level platform, as far down the slope as one could get with any comfort and like all the viewpoints at Ampthill, a short walk from the drive.

Ampthill provides a fine example of the importance of water to Brown. His lake at Ampthill, 'the Rezzy', as it is now known, is not large and has been stopped up in a little valley half way down the hill. It is in a most awkward position, and the huge expenditure and effort that was necessary was undertaken largely to bring off this single view.

If one can judge the significance of a view by the effort it takes to make it, then this is the most important view from the Upper Park at Ampthill and it deserves careful consideration.

In addition to the Rezzy, some other ponds would have been visible here. There might have been a glimpse of a small pond by the lime trees, off to the right, east of the view to Park House, but there would also have been a sight of the Horse Ponds around the West Approach, and to the Long Pond beyond them during the winter.

Some of the planting shown in the painting survives, the pollard sweet chestnut is the best example. One would expect this to have been cut deliberately so as to show off the view. Exactly the same effect was brought off by clipping a single oak to create a view from the Turkey Building to the Grotto at Wotton in which the Grotto appeared to be floating in the tree.

The picture gives further evidence for screening planting that has come and gone - there should be more on the scarp and less on the lower ground near the pond. The Scots Pine shown in the picture would probably have been one of Brown's, planted on the Great Terrace near the cross, and there is evidence for a conifer walk along the terrace.

This view today makes a fabulous picture, with the stark white birch trunks at the foot of the hill and the heap of logs near them, just as Gainsborough would have painted them, but also real.
THE LIME WALK

The Lime Walk was planted in about 1680 and at that time it ran up to the Bedford Road. However this road was later moved about 50 yards further east, to its present position. The Lime Walk therefore stops short of the road today. All this may have happened before Brown arrived, leaving the house without its main approach and everything in a bit of a muddle.

Brown is reckoned to have felled avenues wherever he saw them, but this is seldom the case, and here the avenue was retained even though it went nowhere. It was actually a very neat device for dividing the park (which continued on the north side of the avenue, across Primrose Hill), and solving the problem of the uphill view from the back of the house.

The valley, more of a fold in the ground, that runs across Primrose Hill, from west to east, is emphasised by the beech clump planted over the old quarry workings on the north side. This valley made up one half of the view south from the house, and it is greatly to Brown’s credit that despite the intractable topography, the view was so praised by one of his greatest critics, John Claudius Loudon:

‘The view from the centre of the garden front is unique: to the right and left are deep valleys, with richly wooded sides, and in front, at a suitable distance, a vista formed by one of the finest avenues of lime trees in the world.’

Brown was surprisingly often called in to tidy up. For example immediately before his first commission at Langley, Bucks, the 3rd Duke of Marlborough was making a lake in Black Park, while his neighbour, the Countess of Hertford, watched and made comments: ‘I am much mistaken if it will hold better than that of the Serpentine River in Hyde Park, for his workmen (of whom there are an hundred constantly employed) appear very ignorant of what they are about’

Brown’s landscapes often contained two or more parks, as here. At least one of these would not have been a deer park, and it is argued that this would have been used for hare coursing, so that dogs could be unleashed without frightening the deer.

Examples of terracing of this sort are legion and include Berrington, Cowdray, Kirkharle and Wrest. Aske is probably the most successful, but the most dramatic must be the Stansted road (B1383) at Audley End, praised by Repton as an example of mediaeval or Tudor generosity when ‘it was … the pride of a country gentleman to shew the beauties of his place to the public, as at Audley End … through which public roads were purposely made to pass, and the views displayed by means of sunk fences’

To the basic ingredients of this view, trees and landform, Brown added two further elements, retaining a Tudor garden and pond (Quince Tree Pond, the Lime trees at the foot of the hill survive from a walk that ran down to it) while immediately above it he brought the Bedford Road, which runs along the east side of Primrose Hill, onto a terrace so as to allow the traffic on it into the view where it could animate the scene.

This adoption of public roads into the design is very typical of Brown’s work, and it just shows how wrong we are to think that he intended to isolate the great country houses where he worked with his woodland belts.

1. The terracing doesn’t show up strongly in this murky picture, but it’s there alright! It has the two effects of concealing the surface of the Bedford road, by building it up above eye-level, and putting the passing traffic on a stage. Houghton House is beyond the road, but concealed behind the trees.
**LITTLE PARK CLUMP**

There is a slight earthwork on this knoll that runs south to the Horse-Chestnut on the corner of the clump, and then turns a right-angle to the west. One would usually expect any views to run out across these slight earthworks. To judge from this earthwork then, there was one view from this clump east across the cricket pitch, towards Ampthill town and another south, over the car park and on to the Little Park.

The aim of this view-point will have been to ‘borrow’ the view, or bring the ‘off-skip’ into the park, in fact this would have been the best view to the Little Park, and it is worth noting that the late 18th century oaks in the belt come to a stop on the left-hand (east) side of the view south, so they would not have obstructed it.

At Ampthill there is hardly a view-point that does not have a clump on it, and hardly a clump that does not have a view from it. This was by no means Brown’s only use for clumps, but at Petworth also the clump planting is all set relatively formally, and all the clumps are at view-points.

There is a good deal missing from this view however, including a lodge beside the road, perhaps built in Brown’s day. He was not generally interested in grand entrances and entrance lodges himself. The examples at Charlton and Tong are intriguing because they are so unusual.

In fact some of his finest designs, such as Stapleford, have no lodge at all on the route most used by the family and their visitors. It seems that there was no great need for lodges until soldiers returning from the Napoleonic wars created some fear of vagabondage, and Repton found it necessary for parks to be guarded to ensure privacy and ‘to prevent the Park being made a thoroughfare’.

Any attempt to date the earthworks at Ampthill will be confounded by the fact that there was a great royal castle here, and heaps of rubble and masonry had to be buried if they could not be reused elsewhere, as the Duke of Bedford used the stone from Houghton House to build the New Inn. In fact it would be reasonable to suppose that most of the knolls were made up of buried rubble and waste from the castle.

This knoll at any rate does appear to be contemporary with the tree planting. For on its east side there is a depression in the ground just sufficient to have provided the earth for the knoll, suggesting that the earthwork was made to provide a platform for the trees. Perhaps there was a desire to get an even spread of clumps around the crown of the hill, but there was no rubble to make up a knoll in this area.

**The view here takes in a range of outcomes in the everlasting conflict between life and landscape. The town is finding new uses for its park, unimagined in Brown’s day, for dog walkers and picnickers in what is now a public park, for sportsmen and women with cricket, rugby and soccer pitches, for people with cars.**

**There is consequently a great reduction in the extent of the landscape. There is divided ownership, there are new ways of farming, there are new beliefs about what we should value in a designed landscape and new beliefs about nature and what our relationship to it should be.**

Despite these pressures, something remains.

---

1. An early 19th century Ordnance Survey drawing shows Little Park south of Ampthill Park, as well as the riding to Houghton House to the north. The riding then ran back to the town down an old avenue. The map shows that at this date Millbrook Clump lay outside the park.
THE NEW LIME WALK

Fences can tell us a tremendous amount about the way Brown intended his landscapes to be managed. For the most part Laurel Wood is bounded by a step-fence. This is a relatively simple way of concealing a fence by having a change in level between two fields (hence the ‘step’), and a park rail fence on the low side, concealed by the change in level.

Among many others, there are examples at Naverstock and Swynnerton. These fences would have made the fields on both sides stock-proof, and they are often found around water-meadows as at Sandleford Priory.

Just inside the wood, north of this point, the old drive can be seen running immediately above the step-fence. This made it possible to drive within the shelter and protection of the wood and look out at the deer and other animals in the park. In its way this was a rather old-fashioned trick for Brown – the terraced walks at Stowe had been made a generation earlier to serve a similar purpose. However he was not afraid to use it, either here, or, to great effect, at Wotton and Aynho.

From this point the farm approach runs down through the parkland to the north-west from the Great Terrace, and the step-fence will have concealed it in views out from the Standing to the west. However we are not confident that it was made before the 19th century.

At this point also, as it runs away to the south-east, the step-fence becomes a sunk fence. A ha-ha might be defined as a retaining wall built underground and stopping at ground level, with a ditch on one side, which tends to be V-shaped.

However the ditch here is U-shaped and the earth has been thrown out to the south, onto the park side, as an earth bank. Both sunk hedges (such as one finds at Oakley and Wotton) and sunk fences have U-shaped ditches. However one would expect a few thorns and hedgerow trees to survive from a sunk hedge, and there are none here.

The fence, which is modern, runs along the line of the Brownian fence, at the foot of the ditch, and hence is invisible. The ditch makes the barrier more deer-proof, because to get over, the deer would have to take the fence and the ditch, from bank to bank, in one jump.

This sunk fence runs for about 100 yards and one may legitimately ask what it was put there for. It lies between the Standing and Russett’s Lodge, and so the answer would appear to be that it was dug so as to open up views between the two.

There may have been a building at Russett’s Lodge before Brown’s arrival, but it is reckoned to have had its stone facade added either by Brown himself or by the architect Sir William Chambers, his contemporary and rival. This facade faces towards the Standing, which suggests a relationship between the two buildings.

Ha-has are most frequently found around gardens and pleasure grounds, because they are only stock-proof on one side. Since a sunk fence, rather than a ha-ha, was dug, it also implies that both sides of the fence were to be grazed, so the woodland around the Standing, probably first planted by Brown, may have been a nursery intended to grow trees for transplanting into the park.

1. The ornamented north front of Russett’s Lodge
It would have been typical for Brown to have created such a vista out of an avenue, by shuffling the trees out of their straight lines. His next concern would have been to provide a balanced setting for the house, so that it would appear inevitable and appropriate that it should have been built here. To achieve this he created symmetrical views, necessarily rather flat, east towards Bedford and west to St Michael’s Church, Millbrook, which was framed by the Millbrook Clump and by some limes on the hill.

This jumbling together of features into one composition was recommended by Brown’s rival, Sir William Chambers, who had praised Chinese Gardens, for ‘particular places … from whence all, or the greatest part of the buildings are collected into one view; rising above each other in amphitheatrical order, spreading out to a considerable extent; and, by their whimsical combinations, exhibiting the most magnificent confusion imaginable’.

Brown’s friend, the poet, Rev. William Mason, and his commentator, Dr. Burgh, recommended something similar, when they discussed the retention of avenues in Brownian landscape: ‘If, therefore, vistas [avenues] are ever to be admitted, or rather to be retained, it is only where they form an approach to some superb mansion, so situated that the principal prospect and ground allotted to picturesque improvement lie entirely on the other side; so much so, that the two different modes of planting can never appear together from any given point of view.

The house then stands at a junction of the design, with the hill of the Upper Park behind it and the North Park in front. Rather than blend these together, Brown used the house to mark a complete change in the design, from the clumps of Upper Park to the single oaks of the North Park. There are good examples of this treatment at Beechwood, Blenheim and Burghley among many other places.

The view from the front of the house today shows off the distant countryside and the railway, but there is nothing remarkable or eye-catching about it. However the skill of the landscaper shows up all the better when the countryside he is working with has little to offer.

In Brown’s day there was a central vista, the full width of the house, running towards the railway (which was not to be built for another 100 years or so). On each side there were groves of ancient pollards and younger oaks and the house itself was framed with platoons of limes, some of which have survived.

There was no pleasure ground or garden on the north side, so the parkland will have run right up to the house, but one would expect the grass in front of the house to have been kept to a very high standard by frequent mowing, as well as by grazing with horses, sheep or deer, rather than cows.

Another aspect of the design can best be addressed from this point. Millbrook Clump and Park Farm to the west, Park House itself, and Houghton House to the east lie in a straight line.

This line is also parallel to the Great Terrace, which runs along the break of slope below the castle site. One might regard this kind of geometry, the use of parallel lines, as a coincidence, but it does crop up elsewhere in Brown’s work - Burton Constable has the best example. It is a geometry which no one could really have noticed at the time - and certainly no one has noticed it until today. Perhaps that was part of its attraction for Brown.

1. The St Ossorys at the north front of Ampthill. Horses produce a fine lawn and were clearly kept in full view of the house at the time.

2. The view from Millbrook Clump shows Park Farm in the middle ground with Park House beyond, dominating the view, and the ruins of Houghton House close to the skyline.
Changes of this kind were not uncommon, and Brown’s successor Repton justified them in terms that are worth listening to:

First, it was better if the entrance faced the park, so that no gates prevented carriages from sweeping up to the front door ‘the gate of a garden enclosure so near the house is frequently dangerous and inconvenient’;

Second, the entrance front should not be on the same side of the house as the best rooms ‘where the principal living rooms are disposed … it is difficult to preserve neatness in the view from the windows’;

Third, the best aspect, and hence the best rooms, tended to be to the south (as at Ampthill), and in that case it was better to have the entrance out of the way on the north front.

This account skirts a more persistent design issue, known as the ‘front door problem’. If you have a symmetrical house, then you instinctively want to make a landscape that works from the middle of it, which is the front door, even though in practice you’re much more likely to spend time in a comfortable room looking out of a window to one side than in the draughty hall.

Brown in short made use of the Lime Walk effectively to stop the view straight ahead. This retained the symmetrical relationship between the house and its setting. The trees of the avenue then framed two further compositions, symmetrically placed to left and right of the walk.

The house remained hidden however, apart from a distant glimpse for passing traffic on the Bedford Road.

This was the garden front in Brown’s day, the house having been turned round, presumably by Sir William Chambers after the Bedford Road was moved and the Lime Walk no longer functioned as an approach.

At Ampthill Brown’s difficulties were exacerbated because the south front faced up the hill. This was also a problem that he faced at Benham and Heveningham. Nonetheless, the view that he created from the centre of this new garden front is the finest bravura solution to the front door problem in the entire canon of his work. It was praised as unique by one of his fiercer critics, John Claudius Loudon: ‘to the right and left are deep valleys, with richly wooded sides, and in front, at a suitable distance, a vista formed by one of the finest avenues of lime trees in the world.’

Brown in short made use of the Lime Walk effectively to stop the view straight ahead. This retained the symmetrical relationship between the house and its setting. The trees of the avenue then framed two further compositions, symmetrically placed to left and right of the walk.

The house remained hidden however, apart from a distant glimpse for passing traffic on the Bedford Road.

This plan shows the sight-lines at the heart of this symmetrical pair of compositions from the house. The southern line runs to the highest point in the park, once marked by a trig point.

There had at one time been at least two Standings at Ampthill, the King’s (first referred to in 1540) and the Queen’s (first referred to in 1534). Tudor standings were primarily designed to watch deer coursing, and to engage in en battue hunting, in which the deer would be driven past the Standing and shot from it.

One might expect therefore to find a Tudor standing further north, close to the site of Park House and closer to the valley floor where the deer would naturally run.

It is more likely then that this was the ‘new brick building’ built ‘on the chief hill … for the view of the game’ in 1649, a two-storey pavilion, ‘being a square of 15 foot of Assize and 20 foot of Assize in height’, with a pitched roof, according to a sketch of 1743.

You can see the footings of a platform on the north side of the Serpentine Drive, projecting out of the north-facing slope. This platform dominates another valley, beautifully formed, though now under woodland and in its day no doubt it had equally fine views to the south.

The area was still valued later in the 18th century and a planting of limes survives around it. We haven’t been able to work out the design, but we do know that it used regular planting intervals. At present any view either to Russett’s Lodge or to the north is hidden, but it is easy to see how by careful thinning and clearance one could improve the look of the wood, and recreate the views – as so often with Brown’s landscapes, the design at Ampthill is not lost, but temporarily mislaid.

This plan shows the sight-lines at the heart of this symmetrical pair of compositions from the house. The southern line runs to the highest point in the park, once marked by a trig point.

1. The Standing at Oatlands, Surrey looks very similar to the only sketch we have of the 17th century Standing at Ampthill.

2. Sketch of the Standing at Ampthill in 1742.
THE TEA COSY CLUMP

Anyone who feels the need to distinguish the natural landform from any reworking of it that Brown might have done in a case like this will die unhappy. The best way to think of Brown and this landform is that if he had found in nature the wonderful sinuous curves that we see here, he would have been delighted to keep them, and if it needed a bit of ploughing and smoothing and rounding out to finish it off, and form a laughing ‘riant’ landscape, he would not have held his hand. A good archaeologist would be advised to take a relaxed approach to earth-working of this kind.

One does sometimes get clues that help to distinguish Brown’s earthworks. He often kept the ridge and furrow, particularly if it was not right in front of the house, perhaps casting it down slightly before grassing it. Berrington is one good example of this. However where he was moving earth in a big way, as he did between the houses and the rivers at Peper Harow and Chatsworth, he removed any ridge and furrow, replacing it, where necessary with drains.

Elsewhere he would take out the ridge and furrow to make it easier to mow the grass for hay. It is worth making the point that the top of the greensand ridge is smooth and Brown is likely to have had it levelled, because his parks were designed to have substantial areas that could be mown. Deer are compatible with making hay, so long as the stocking density is not too great. Of course if any ruins of the Castle had survived, he would have wanted to save them, as he so often did – at Sherborne Castle and Roche Abbey for example.

from the north. One might rather think that it was designed to be seen from the town and from the point at which the West Approach enters the park. Indeed one might think of the park as a lost back-drop to the town, a relationship that one can still see today where the parkland of Wycombe Abbey hangs over the modern town of High Wycombe.

We would be happy to call this kind of landscape Brownian, without worrying whether he actually did anything to it. There is another good example of it in the Pheasantry, on the far side of the lake at Blenheim.
One would expect a place like Ampthill to have had at least two approaches: the principal (often known as the London Approach), which would take a grand route through the parkland and was intended to impress; and a direct approach to enable tradesmen to get quickly in and out of the house.

In addition one might expect to find a drive or walk to the church, which in the case of Park House would have run down the Lime Walk and continued across Bedford Road

Though they are obviously descended from avenues, these sleeves have none of the measured precision of the early 18th century style. They are not straight, they flex with the road, they use a mix of species and paced intervals (a ‘paced’ interval is walked out, rather than measured with a line, and they are very common in Brown’s work).

The best examples of these sleeves that we have recorded are at Kiddington, Wilton and Flambards; they give a certain lightness to the approach – one is not confined as by an avenue, but one is still gently directed along the road.

So by spreading the trees out like this one ensures that the views come to the traveller’s eye at a regular rate. It’s just a theory, but it does make some sense of these intervals, and it can be applied elsewhere, as between the clumps in the North Park at Croome.

It is very hard to tell what the views were here, because of the growth around the Rezzy. However each appears to have been a view to the water, and one would expect each to have been different, with the water appearing and disappearing as one continued down the approach.

In reconstructing these glimpses in the imagination, one should be always conscious of the need for the water to appear natural, so avoiding any sense that it is actually halfway up a hill.

You’ll notice that that is never apparent from the approach.

Turning to the intervals in the Ampthill sleeve, one might conclude that these are three or four times greater than one would expect in an avenue. But then avenues were by and large designed for walking down, while an approach is for carriages, and carriages travel three or four times faster than pedestrians.

The best route for a London Approach would be difficult to select for Ampthill, when traffic might come up the A5 (Watling Street) to Woburn, or the A6 Bedford – Luton road.

The new West Approach, which is attributed to Brown, ran out to Woburn Abbey, the principal seat in the county, and one to which Lord Ossory was connected. You can tell just from looking at it that it was constructed to quite a different specification from the drives and walks elsewhere in the park.

The painting does not show Brown’s most interesting touch which is the use of ‘sleeve’ planting. This consists of single trees of various species planted at paced intervals of around 40 yards along the approach. Some of these trees (beech, sycamore and horse chestnut), still survive at Ampthill, and on old plans they are shown to run beside the approach all the way to the house.

In Brown’s day the house could not be approached by carriage down the Lime Walk. We believe that before he arrived the Bedford Road had been moved to a new route, further east and so the avenue no longer connected with it.

In reconstructing these glimpses in the imagination, one should be always conscious of the need for the water to appear natural, so avoiding any sense that it is actually halfway up a hill.

You’ll notice that that is never apparent from the approach.

So by spreading the trees out like this one ensures that the views come to the traveller’s eye at a regular rate. It’s just a theory, but it does make some sense of these intervals, and it can be applied elsewhere, as between the clumps in the North Park at Croome.

It is very hard to tell what the views were here, because of the growth around the Rezzy. However each appears to have been a view to the water, and one would expect each to have been different, with the water appearing and disappearing as one continued down the approach.

In reconstructing these glimpses in the imagination, one should be always conscious of the need for the water to appear natural, so avoiding any sense that it is actually halfway up a hill.

You’ll notice that that is never apparent from the approach.

The painting does not show Brown’s most interesting touch which is the use of ‘sleeve’ planting. This consists of single trees of various species planted at paced intervals of around 40 yards along the approach. Some of these trees (beech, sycamore and horse chestnut), still survive at Ampthill, and on old plans they are shown to run beside the approach all the way to the house.

The best route for a London Approach would be difficult to select for Ampthill, when traffic might come up the A5 (Watling Street) to Woburn, or the A6 Bedford – Luton road.

The new West Approach, which is attributed to Brown, ran out to Woburn Abbey, the principal seat in the county, and one to which Lord Ossory was connected. You can tell just from looking at it that it was constructed to quite a different specification from the drives and walks elsewhere in the park.

The painting does not show Brown’s most interesting touch which is the use of ‘sleeve’ planting. This consists of single trees of various species planted at paced intervals of around 40 yards along the approach. Some of these trees (beech, sycamore and horse chestnut), still survive at Ampthill, and on old plans they are shown to run beside the approach all the way to the house.

Turning to the intervals in the Ampthill sleeve, one might conclude that these are three or four times greater than one would expect in an avenue. But then avenues were by and large designed for walking down, while an approach is for carriages, and carriages travel three or four times faster than pedestrians.