The Grade I-listed park at Bowood shows Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown at the height of his career, creating a beautiful, naturalistic landscape of sweeping lawns and wooded plantations. Dominating the park is the typically sinuous mile-long lake he created as part of his five-year project for the 2nd Earl of Shelburne between 1762 and 1768.

Although other famous designers and gardeners worked at Bowood after Brown, the 40 hectares of pleasure grounds and surrounding park have been preserved and added to over the past 250 years.

In 1841, actress Fanny Kemble summed up Brown’s achievement at Bowood: “... a home of terrestrial delights ... a charming English landscape, educated with consummate taste into the very perfection of apparently natural beauty...”

Bowood House: www.bowood.org/bowood-house-gardens/capability-brown/

Particular thanks to Jo Johnston at Bowood

For more information about Brown and his work go to capabilitybrown.org/research
The Earls of Shelburne

Brown first visited the Bowood estate in 1757, when the 1st Earl of Shelburne was enlarging the house and wanted advice on the garden. The earl later commented that Brown was “very carefull in Viewing & Examining”, as he rode around the grounds, studying the lay of the land; he was less happy about being charged a fee of 30 guineas (£55,820 in 2015). Despite all Brown’s flattering comments about the qualities of the park, the earl felt he hadn’t received value for money.

Brown’s initial visit did prove valuable to William, the 2nd Earl of Shelburne, who inherited the estate in 1761. He hired architect Robert Adam to remodel the interiors of Bowood House and chose Brown, then at the peak of his career, to landscape the park. Lord Shelburne was one of the six prime ministers who employed Brown during his long and illustrious career. Brown also worked for him at Wycombe Abbey.

The contract

Under a contract dated 10 August 1762, Brown was to be paid £4,300 (more than £7.2 million in 2015), with the works to be done by June 1766. In the end the project ran on until 1768, with up to 300 men working at Bowood. Their daily rate was one shilling (£85 in 2015). This compares well to today’s wages for labourers, who earn an average salary of £16,000, whereas in the 18th century their wage was the equivalent of £22,000, well above the current National Wage.

Under the contract, Brown was to level the ground, form a lake, create a ha-ha (sunken wall and ditch), make roads, lay out the Great Plantations and plant trees, shrubs and grass. Lord Shelburne provided the horses, carts and wheelbarrows and sourced the exotic trees needed for the project. Lady Shelburne recorded the progress of work in the house and gardens in her diary.
Serpentine lake

The mile-long serpentine lake at Bowood is on the eastern side of the parkland. The Whetham Brook runs from south to north and is joined by a second stream from the south-west, the Wash Way. Brown used all his skills and experience here, draining land and moving earth to form the new lake from damming these two streams. As a result of the works, most of the people who lived at nearby Mannings Hill had to be rehoused in other villages, like Sandy Lane. About half a dozen cottages were “taken down... to be overflowed with the Pond”.

Brown also reshaped the parkland on the western side of the lake, creating wide-ranging vistas down to the water’s edge. Lady Shelburne was delighted with the results of all of this hard work, which was done without the benefit of mechanical digging equipment. Her diary entry on 17 June 1766 records: “...we took a Walk & were vastly pleas’d with the Effect of the Water which flows into a Magnificent River and only wants to rise to its proper hight wch it comes nearer to every day...”

Pleasure grounds

At Bowood the pleasure grounds lie just beyond the rectangular walled garden to the north of the house. They cover about 40 hectares and are laid out in an informal style, with a ha-ha separating this area from the wider parkland. Walks through the pleasure grounds take in various features around the lake that were added after Brown’s time at Bowood. These include the cascade and grotto, a hermit’s cave, Doric Temple and Lakeside Cottage.
Please note that not all Brown features marked are accessible to the public. Patrons of the hotel and golf course have access to the surrounding parkland. The Mausoleum and woodland garden are open for six weeks in the spring and there are occasional tours of the private walled garden.
Park and Plantations

Brown's design of the parkland and pleasure grounds at Bowood are a fine example of the naturalistic style that had replaced the fashion for more formal gardens. From his earlier visit to Bowood in 1757 Brown had obviously worked out how best to position the house within a rolling landscape, filled with trees.

The park at Bowood lies to the west, south and south-east of the house and is surrounded by woodland and plantations, including Bassett's Moor to the north and Derry Hill plantation to the west. Robert Adam designed a mausoleum on a small hill in Pilpot Wood, south-west of the park. This Grade I-listed building was to commemorate the 1st Earl of Shelburne, and gives views over the park and towards the house in the north-east.

On 30 May 1765 Lady Shelburne's diary noted, “...they are now at Work the Mausoleum remains only to be pav’d... Mr Browne's plantations are very young but promising”.

Brown supplied the “forest trees”, with Lord Shelburne sourcing “curious seeds and trees” for the new pleasure grounds. These included cedar of Lebanon – one of Brown's signature trees – several of which can still be seen at Bowood. Brown created a ride through these thick belts of trees, so that visitors could enjoy views of the park from all directions.
Biodiversity at Bowood
At Bowood the parkland features support a variety of habitats including wood pasture and parkland, ancient woodland, replanted ancient woodland, broadleaved woodland, mixed broadleaved woodland and coniferous woodland. Also wetland species associated with the mile long lake and ponds.

Bowood House after Brown
Building on Brown’s achievements at Bowood, later designers added to the park, pleasure grounds and formal gardens. In around 1785 a cascade and grotto were built at the head of Brown’s lake, with advice from Charles Hamilton, the owner and designer of Painshill in Surrey. In 1817 the 3rd Marquess of Lansdowne hired architect Robert Smirke (1780-1867) to build an upper terrace outside the orangery that joined the pavilions of the main house. In the mid-19th century, head gardener John Spencer created the pinetum in the centre of the pleasure grounds at Bowood.

In 1955 Bowood House was demolished, leaving only the service courts and Robert Adam’s orangery, which were converted into a new house. The estate remains in private ownership, offering a range of leisure facilities including a golf course and spa, and venues for weddings and corporate events.

The houses and pleasure grounds are open to the public, and part of the parkland is accessible to patrons of the Bowood Hotel & Spa and the golf course. There is a Capability Brown themed garden tour and occasional tours of the private walled gardens. The mausoleum and woodland garden, with its displays of rhododendrons and azaleas, are open for six weeks in the spring.