

Capability Brown at Burton Constable



Brown's bridge and dam across the lake at Burton Constable © Burton Constable Foundation

Beginning in 1769, Capability Brown transformed the “dull, flat country” around Burton Constable. Working with owner William Constable (1721-91), a noted plant collector, he created a large lake and bridge, designed a ha-ha and introduced many varieties of trees into the park, which had been criticised for its “vast nakedness”.

Earlier, in the late 1750s, Brown had drawn up designs for the interior of the Great Hall at Burton Constable. His ideas were not used here, but can be seen in Brown's design of the ceiling of the Saloon at Corsham Court dating from 1763. Ten years later, he visited again, exploring the park with Constable, who wanted advice about clumping trees in his avenues and what to do with the lakes. Constable went on a Grand Tour of Europe and their landscaping project didn't get started until September 1772.

Brown made at least eight visits to Burton Constable between 1772 and 1782, usually in the autumn. The final visit was on 15 October 1782. His account book notes a visit to the property in 1774, but there is little information about payment, apart from a sum of £8 and 4 shillings (£13,000 in 2015) in 1767.

www.burtonconstable.com

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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 (1742/1821)/Private Collection/Bridgeman Images.



LOTTERY FUNDED

Hints from Mr Brown

Brown's ideas for Burton Constable – “Hints from Mr Brown” – are set out in a series of eight notes or minutes, starting on 8 September 1772. These were recorded by John Raines, Constable's steward, and ranged from practical advice on weeding plantations and building ha-has to more general principles of design. They give a rare glimpse into how Brown's design for the estate was developed over the years.



Mr Brown's directions © Burton Constable Foundation

Piece of water in the park

The park at Burton Constable is dominated by the spectacular lake, which was formed in several stages. It was on Constable's to-do list, as “Piece of Water in the Park”, when he consulted Brown in the late 1760s.

In his first set of minutes from 8 September 1772, Raines noted Brown's advice about the lake: “Cut down the trees... Between the Menagerie Pond and Stanks as these two waters will probably be enlarged and made into one sheet”. In 1773 Raines wrote that Brown said the ponds still needed “to be widened and thro[w]n into one piece of water”, but this still hadn't been done by 1774. By 1775 the enlarged lake had been formed, but there were further changes over the next seven years.



View of Burton Constable Hall by George Barret © Burton Constable Foundation

Brown's plan was for the water level in the lake to be visible from the gardens. When he visited the estate on 30 September 1775 he realised that if the enlarged lake was to appear as one piece of water he would have to build a dam. This would be hidden by a bridge, disguising the fact that the larger North lake was 3 or 4 feet lower than the South lake. On 3 August 1776 Raines helpfully noted: “The Bridge will cost about 3 or £400 and that “The Plinth & cornice of Stone – The rest Brick”.

Brown had to rework some of his ideas during his years of involvement at Burton Constable. The islands he designed for the lakes were built in 1776 but removed in 1778.



Trees in the Burton Constable parkland in winter © Karl Holtby

Clumps of trees

The parkland at Burton Constable had been laid out in the formal style of the late 17th century and early 18th century, with four straight axial avenues running from the house. It would have been “too great a sacrifice” to cut down these mature elm and chestnut trees, so Brown adapted them to fit his more naturalistic planting scheme. He did remove part of the avenue to the east of the house and thinned out the trees in the other avenues. He rerouted the Sproatley road to the east of the house and used trees of differing heights to create a frame around views of the 16th-century mansion.

The Raines minutes included Brown’s advice on tree planting: “Small clumps are nothing, only pimples upon the Face of Nature – make your Clumps large & massy”. The clumps would also be on ‘humps’, to improve drainage. At Burton Constable most of the trees he planted were native to Britain, including elm, beech and lime. He also used conifers, sometimes to vary the edges of his plantations. Larch and spruce were planted to provide shelter to young trees in newly planted clumps.

To create a layered woodland look for his plantings, Brown advised planting box, holly and yew. Thousands of silver birch trees were also bought for the park. Constable, who was very interested in botany, bought exotic trees from America, including sugar maple and scarlet oak.

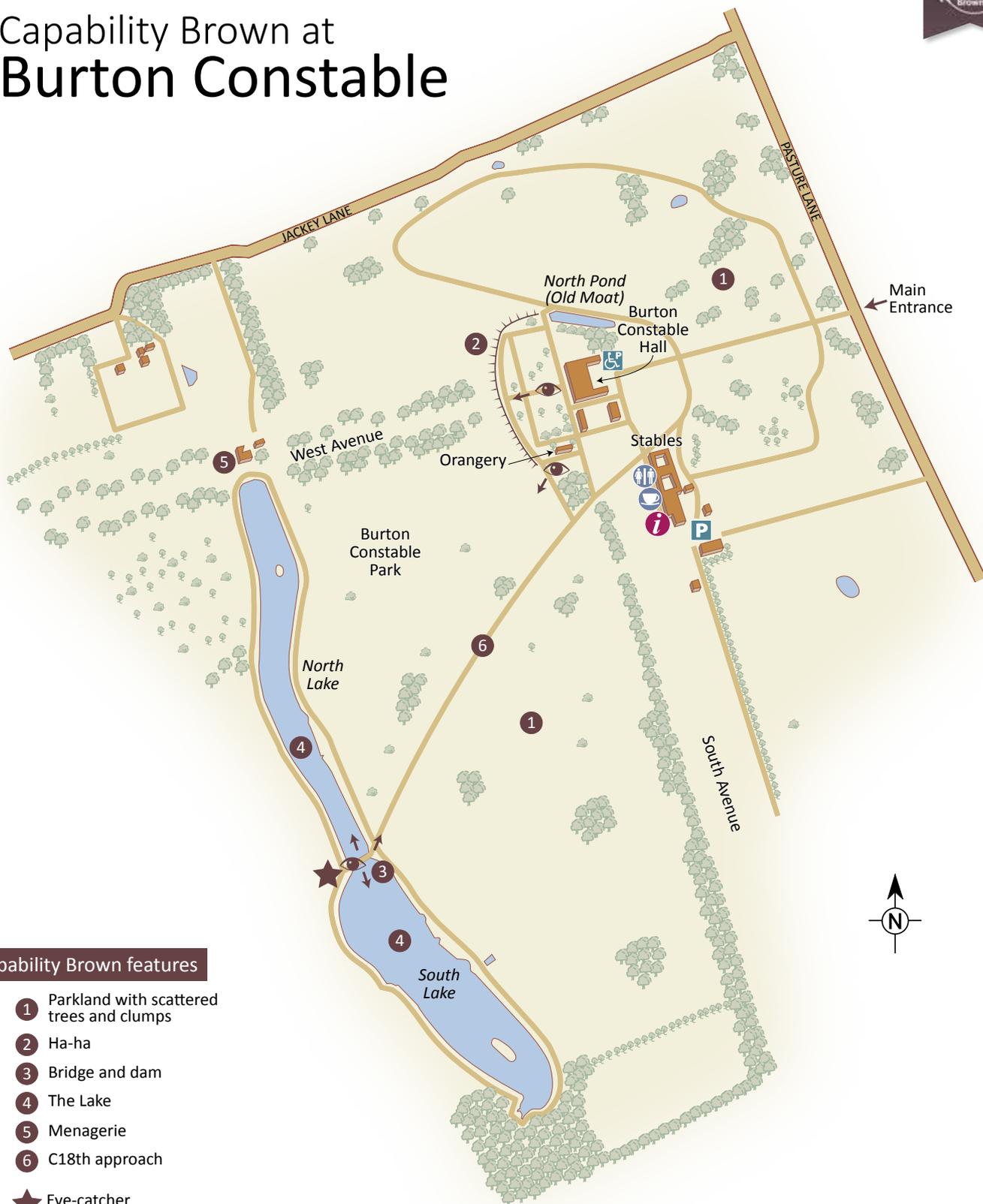
Curved ha-ha

Brown also designed a semi-circular brick ha-ha (sunken wall and ditch) along the line of a medieval moat, to the west of the house. This acted as an invisible barrier for grazing sheep and cattle in the park, without interrupting the views. Later he proposed a stuccade (wooden fence) in another area of the park, though this wasn’t effective against leaping deer.



The ha-ha © Burton Constable Foundation

Capability Brown at Burton Constable



Capability Brown features

- ① Parkland with scattered trees and clumps
- ② Ha-ha
- ③ Bridge and dam
- ④ The Lake
- ⑤ Menagerie
- ⑥ C18th approach

- ★ Eye-catcher
- ↑ Viewpoint

- Ha-ha
- Specimen trees
- Woodland or copse
- Parkland trees
- Shrubbery

- Visitor Centre
- Refreshments
- Toilets
- Parking
- Disabled Parking

300 yards
 300 metres

Brown was involved in many aspects of the remodelling of Burton Constable until his death in February 1783. He gave advice on the ornamental flower garden that Winifred Constable, William's sister, had established to the north-west of the house. Later he created a special view for Catherine, William's wife: "Cut down some trees to make an opening for a view of the house, from Mrs C's seat in the Park near the Bridge".



Brown's brewhouse © Burton Constable Foundation

In 1772 Brown re-organised the service buildings in the south courtyard. Here he designed a curtain wall ending in

castellated towers. Behind them stood coal bunkers, a brewhouse, slaughterhouse, dairy, bakery and workshops.

William Constable was obviously very happy with the results of Brown's work. In 1784 he wrote to his half-brother: "My park 40 years ago was 400 or 500 acres of a Wilderness of Old Thornes, old decayed forest trees, whins or gorse higher than a man on horseback, rushes, hillcocks, deep ridge and furrow, rivers and swamps and full of all kinds of game. Now all are removed at great expense."



Portrait of William Constable by George Barret © Burton Constable Foundation

Biodiversity

At Burton Constable, the parkland features support a variety of habitats including wood pasture and parkland, ancient woodland, deciduous woodland, mixed broadleaved and coniferous woodland, and habitats such as reed bed that are associated with the ponds and large lake. The pasture at Burton Constable is managed without the use of fertilisers in order to encourage a diversity of grassland species together with animal and bird life. The surrounding landscape is sparsely wooded so the site provides an important refuge for woodland species.

Burton Constable today

The estate remained in the ownership of the Constable family until 1992, when the hall, stables and surrounding 300 acres of parkland were taken over by the Burton Constable Foundation. The Elizabethan house (listed Grade I) and the park (listed Grade II*) are open to the public. A section of the ha-ha running from the North lake along the west front towards the Orangery has been restored, but the rest was filled in during the early 19th century. Repair work has also been done on Brown's bridge.

A continuing programme of parkland restoration started in 1992, with thousands of trees replanted to recreate Brown's clumps and to thicken the avenues to the south and west of the house. The park is grazed by a variety of rare-breed cattle and sheep – which add a final touch to Brown's beautiful landscape.