In 1760 Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown prepared a ‘great General Plan’ for the parkland at Castle Ashby for Charles, 7th Earl of Northampton. He signed a contract for work to start on the 10,000 acre estate, but he and his wife died in Italy in 1763, so never saw the work completed.

The estate has been in the Compton family since 1512. In 1574 Henry Compton built the fine Elizabethan house in the shape of an E to celebrate the coronation of Queen Elizabeth I.

Brown’s work included restoring the south avenue of trees and re-levelling the ground around the house to improve the views He carefully selected, planted and felled trees to create vistas towards the Temple Menagerie, the new Park Pond. A curving ha-ha (sunken wall and ditch) was created to protect the pleasure garden from grazing animals, the fishponds were made into lakes, with a dam and cascade, and a serpentine carriage drive crossed them to create an impressive approach to the house.

Northamptonshire Gardens Trust: www.northamptonshiregardenstrust.org
whose film about Castle Ashby can be viewed on YouTube

Particular thanks to Christine Addison, Jenny Burt, Rod Conlon, Carol Fitzgerald and Elaine Johnson for their help.

For more information about Brown and his work go to capabilitybrown.org/research
When Brown arrived at Castle Ashby the Elizabethan house was still surrounded by formal gardens, with avenues stretching from the house to the four points of the compass. In 1688 the diarist John Evelyn visited and described the gardens as 'nothing extraordinary except the iron gate opening into the park which indeede was very good work'.

In 1760 the Earl had the estate surveyed and both Robert Adam and Brown were asked to prepare plans. Brown's was chosen and his contract was signed by the Earl on 14 October 1761. Soon afterwards he and his wife set off on a tour abroad; sadly, they died at Naples in 1763. Brown recorded that work started in their absence, including 'pulling down the old ice house and Building a new one in a very expensive manner and place', creating a ha-ha between the Red Deer paddock and the kitchen garden, and preparing new ground. Including the £50 for his initial plan, these works cost a total of £1,816 10 shillings and 7 pence (£3.2 million in 2015).

The Lakes
Work continued under the 8th Earl, Spencer, younger brother to Charles. Several small fishponds at the bottom of the hill on which the house stands were turned into two larger ones: Park Pond and Menagerie Pond. The boundary wall was replaced with a ha-ha, so that smooth grass seemed to run right up to the edge of the water. Beside the lake Brown placed a stone classical temple, with a domed roof and Ionic columns, hiding a menagerie behind it.

Planting and moving trees
Extensive plantations were made around the ponds. The avenue to the north was removed, while those to the east and west were broken up, with damaged trees removed and others moved or separated into clumps. Brown never felled healthy trees if he could help it and invented ingenious tree-moving machinery to enable him to move mature trees. This opened up views from the house towards the new Temple Menagerie, Park Pond and Knucklebone Arbour. Although his original plan showed it broken into clumps, the south avenue to the old deer park at Yardley Chase was kept. Work was supervised by Brown’s foreman John Midgely. An undated letter from him to Brown asks: 'You’ll let me have Twenty Pounds against next Satterday night to Pay the Men.'
The estate is known for its veteran trees, many planted around Brown’s new rides and serpentine carriage drive. These include native trees such as oak, beech, lime and horse chestnut and the more exotic cedar of Lebanon, Brown’s trademark tree.

As well as the Temple Menagerie, Brown also designed a dairy, which gave its name to the Dairy Walk. Two payments were made to carpenter John Hobcroft for his work on it. This building also hid its practical purpose behind a stone front in Palladian style. (The Dairy is in a private area of the estate and cannot be seen by visitors.)

The Earl of Northampton was in financial difficulties and thinking of selling his estate at Fenstanton. He owed Brown money for the work at Castle Ashby, and Brown eventually acquired Fenstanton in part settlement of the Earl’s debt. For more information see www.capabilitybrown.org/garden/manor-house

The 19th Century
The bridge crossing the south end of the Menagerie Pond originally had an ironwork balustrade. This was replaced by the Terracotta Bridge around 1865, and there is a boat house nearby. Matthew Digby Wyatt designed the orangery in 1872 and the Italian garden, arboretum, and walled kitchen garden also date from the 19th century.

Biodiversity at Castle Ashby
At Castle Ashby the parkland features support a variety of habitats including wood pasture and parkland, ancient woodland, deciduous woodland, mixed broadleaved and coniferous woodland, good quality semi-improved grassland, lowland meadow and habitats associated with the lake.

Castle Ashby contains the Yardley Chase Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The great variety of semi-natural habitat, diversity of associated species and large total area makes Yardley Chase one of the foremost sites for nature conservation in the East Midlands. It is important for the Wood White butterfly and deadwood invertebrates including a rare click beetle. For further information about Yardley Chase SSSI see www.capabilitybrown.org/garden/castle-ashby

Castle Ashby today
Castle Ashby remains the home of the 7th Marquess of Northampton. The estate is open to the public all year and has extensive visitor facilities. For more details see www.castleashbygardens.co.uk