

# Capability Brown at Compton Verney



Compton Verney house seen from the Adam Bridge © VisitEngland

Lancelot 'Capability' Brown improved the park and gardens at Compton Verney, near Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire from 1768. The owner, the 14th Lord Willoughby de Broke, was extending the house at this time, using architect Robert Adam. Brown replaced the formal gardens around the house with lawn and trees and joined the existing pools together into a serpentine lake. The south drive was redesigned and over 2,200 oak and ash trees planted in the park. Brown is known to have designed the chapel and ice house, and may also have designed the Adam Bridge and orangery.

Brown's account book shows his first payment from Lord Willoughby de Broke on 19 November 1768. By then he had already visited the estate and drawn up plans. The first contract was completed by May 1770, and a second contract ran until 1774. Overall, he was paid £3,830 (just over £6 million in 2015) for his work at Compton Verney.

Compton Verney [www.comptonverney.org.uk/park/](http://www.comptonverney.org.uk/park/)

Particular thanks to Gary Webb at Compton Verney

For more information about Brown and his work go to [capabilitybrown.org/research](http://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](http://capabilitybrown.org/research)

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



**LOTTERY FUNDED**



Bridge and Plane tree seen from the house © VisitEngland and Compton Verney

### Park and pleasure grounds

Brown laid out the western lawns and pleasure grounds at Compton Verney, removing the early 18th century formal gardens. He laid lawns and planted trees to replace a canal and parterres (formal beds) on three sides of the house. He also created pleasure grounds to the south-east, in what had been a plantation or wilderness area and worked in the northern areas of the park.

Brown turned the lakes into a single expanse of water by removing the dam between the upper long pool and the middle pool. This made way for a new bridge. As part of his scheme, Brown formed the south drive by remodelling an early 18th century formal walk or avenue into a more curved shape. He probably made changes to the formal layout of the kitchen garden.

Brown used his trademark cedar of Lebanon in many places in the park and pleasure grounds at Compton Verney. He also placed a single London plane overlooking the triple-arched Adam Bridge, which can still be seen from the house.

By May 1770 his first contract for Compton Verney was completed and Brown had been paid a total of £1,000 (more than £1.6 million in 2015). His second contract ran until 1774, for which he was paid £2,830 (almost £4.5 million in 2015).

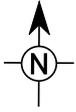
### Brown's Chapel

Brown designed a number of buildings at Compton Verney. The medieval church of Compton Murdak stood close to the windows of the house and would have blocked the views into the landscape. In 1772 Brown had it pulled down, and there is a note in his account book for 1774 that he had supplied "Drawings for the Chapel". Brown's new chapel was in the Palladian style with a pedimented façade, and he placed it on the slope to the north of the house, near the kitchen garden. Work on it was begun in 1776 and completed in 1780. Some of the family monuments, including the altar tomb of Sir Richard Verney, were moved to the new building, which is now listed Grade I and has been recently restored.



Brown's Palladian chapel © Compton Verney

# Capability Brown at Compton Verney



## Capability Brown features

- ① Lawns with trees
- ② Cedar of Lebanon
- ③ Serpentine Lake
- ④ Adam Bridge
- ⑤ South Drive
- ⑥ Chapel
- ⑦ Icehouse
- ⑧ Planting in the parkland

★ Eye-catcher

👁 Viewpoint

⤴ Ha-ha

🌲 Specimen trees

🌳 Woodland or copse

🌳 Parkland trees

🌿 Shrubbery

📍 Visitor Centre

☕ Refreshments

🚻 Toilets

P Parking

150 yards

150 metres



View of the Adam Bridge across the east lawn © Compton Verney

The triple-arched Adam Bridge takes the main carriage drive across the lake to the house. It is not known whether the bridge, which is listed Grade II\*, was designed by Brown or Robert Adam. If it was designed by Brown, it would have been part of his scheme for joining the five existing pools into a wide, serpentine river.

In 1772 Brown created a brick ice house in an ornamental wood beside the lake. This had an oval-shaped chamber sunk into the ground to keep ice cool, for fashionable ice creams and sorbets. Visitors would have been able to glimpse its thatched roof from the original paths through the woodland.

It is likely that Brown also designed the Classical-style orangery, which stood about 130 metres north-west of the house, and was built during the years that he was working at the estate. This was pulled down in around 1930.



The restored ice house © John Cleary Photography

## Biodiversity at Compton Verney

At Compton Verney the parkland features support a variety of habitats including wood pasture and parkland, lowland meadow, good quality semi-improved grassland, ancient woodland, replanted ancient woodland, deciduous woodland, mixed broadleaved and coniferous woodland. The lake supports a variety of species including fish, frogs, water boatmen and dragonflies.

## Compton Verney today

In 1921 the 19th Lord Willoughby de Broke sold the house and land to businessman Joseph Watson. It was requisitioned during World War II, and in 1958 was bought by Harry Ellard, a local property owner, who allowed it to be used for filming, but by 1983 the estate was semi-derelict. In 1993 the house and immediate grounds were bought by the Peter Moores Foundation to be used as an art gallery. The rest of the estate is in divided ownership.

The chapel and Grade II\* listed landscape at Compton Verney are being restored with the support of a £2.5million grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. The Art Gallery and Park are open to the public.