Capability Brown was commissioned in 1751 by the 6th Earl of Coventry to redesign both the landscape and the house at Croome. It was his first commission after leaving his job at Stowe and he went back to work at Croome over many years, developing a close relationship with the earl.

Brown took the opportunity to demonstrate his skills as a landscape designer, water engineer and architect. The estate was marshy, and had to be drained before he could start work. He created a large lake and laid out parkland planted with shrubberies, groves and woodland, in the newly fashionable landscape style.

The village was moved out of view of the house and formal gardens dug up. The old church was demolished and a new one built by Brown on a more prominent site. Winding paths framed carefully chosen views of the parkland, house, a fine tree or garden building.

The National Trust: https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/croome
Particular thanks to Katherine Alker of the National Trust at Croome for her help.
For more information about Brown and his work go to capabilitybrown.org/research
The drainage problem
Croome sits on a plain between two rivers, the Avon and the Severn, and was largely marshland when Brown started work. He put in lots of culverts, underground drains which channelled the water away from the house and towards the site of a new ‘river’ in a boggy area called Seggy Mere. The river is actually a narrow lake one and three-quarter miles long, snaking across the parkland. All of it had to be dug out by hand. It created dry foundations for the new house, as well as forming an impressive water feature.

A Palladian mansion
Brown replaced the existing 17th century house, the second on the site, with a classical, stone mansion in the Palladian style. It has a portico on the south side and corner turrets. Soon afterwards he designed a similar house at Newnham Paddox. Work went quickly, and by 1752 Brown was working on the decoration of the main rooms for entertaining: the entrance hall, dining room, billiard room and the saloon. Architect Robert Adam decorated some of the other rooms.

Creating the Lake
At the top of the man-made ‘river’ is a wider pool or lake, fed by a spring, with two islands. Brown designed a stone grotto overlooking the lake and a small classical summerhouse with Corinthian pillars for one of the islands. The water then narrows to meander in a double curve past the west and south fronts of the house and runs down to the edge of the park. At the bottom is a ‘carriage splash’ where guests could cross the shallow water as they were driven around to admire the park. The fact that this was a lake and not a river was hidden by carefully placed islands, bridges, planting and the apparently natural curving course of the water.
Rebuilding the church

The old church near the house was demolished in 1758. The site chosen for its replacement was on higher ground, overlooking the pasture, to create a good view of the tower from the house. Brown originally proposed a classical design for the new church but the final design was Gothic with a pinnacled tower. The interior was decorated by Robert Adam and the old Coventry family monuments reinstalled in the chancel. The new church and transformed park were recorded in a painting by Richard Wilson, commissioned by Lord Coventry.

Planting the parkland

Planting the estate and the shrubberies around the house and church continued for many years, using trees and shrubs from far-flung corners of the globe. In 1801 Croome was described as ‘second only to Kew’ for its botanical diversity.

The only one of Capability Brown’s account books to have survived starts in June 1760, so we only know about payments for work after that. These include payments to Benjamin Read, who was the foreman Brown left in charge of work at Croome, and to the brothers William and David Hiorne, Warwickshire builders.

Viewpoints and eye-catchers

In laying out the parkland, Brown thought carefully about the views of the landscape to and from the house. Planting screened the edges of the estate, and was used to frame ‘eye-catchers’ and draw attention to these carefully composed ‘pictures’.

The house itself was reflected in the water and set off by fine specimen trees. Views of the church tower to the north were framed by planting. The west front of the house looks out across the parkland and river to the Panorama tower in the distance, while the tower itself gives views over Brown’s landscape.

Brown designed a classical rotunda to sit on a small hill near the home shrubbery to give views over the parkland and wider landscape. Later Robert Adam designed Park Seat and Dunstall Castle as eye-catchers to the south. Incorporating views of follies or fake ruins at the edges of the estate made it seem bigger and older than it really was.

Brown and Biodiversity

At Croome, the parkland features support a variety of habitats including Wood Pasture and Parkland, Lowland Meadow, Ancient Woodland, Deciduous Woodland, Broadleaved Woodland, Coniferous Woodland, Mixed Coniferous Woodland and habitats associated with the lake and ponds including Coastal and Floodplain Grazing Marsh.
Capability Brown at Croome

- Wilderness Walk
- Church of St Magdalene
- Ice House
- Rotunda
- Monument to Capability Brown
- The Grotto and Sabrina
- Island Pavilion
- Boathouse Remains
- Menagerie Wood
- Eye-catcher
- Viewpoint

- Visitor Centre
- Refreshments
- Toilets
- Parking

* privately owned, check opening times
Croome after Brown

A description of Croome written in 1824, ‘Hortus Croomensis’, gives a lively account of the landscape as it was then. During the 19th century the 9th Earl of Coventry (1838-1930) was so proud of Croome that he didn’t change any of it, and in 1921 he created the Croome Estate Trust to look after it. The estate was requisitioned during the Second World War and part of it was turned into RAF Defford.

The estate fell into a state of disrepair after the family sold up, starting in 1948. The house and immediate surroundings were bought by the Catholic church, who used the court as a boys’ school until 1979. After that it was lived in by the Hare Krishna movement for five years. The court was a hotel for a short time, and then owned by private individuals, lastly in the early 2000s by a property developer.

The parkland was turned over to arable farming, and many of the parkland trees were lost or damaged. The shrubberies were either left to get completely overgrown, or were ripped out to provide more ground for farming. The garden buildings and statues were uncared for and became damaged.

Restoration by the National Trust

The National Trust bought the landscape park at Croome in 1996. Since then, they have researched the history of the park in the immense archive of documents to restore Brown’s design and replant the rich variety of trees and shrubs that were once to be found there.

Visitors now are seeing the park and pleasure grounds much as Brown would have done, with recently planted shrubs and trees that have not yet reached their full potential, and the restoration of the buildings that Brown himself designed.

A lifelong friendship

For the rest of his life Brown has a close relationship with the 6th Earl of Coventry. Unusually, Brown returned many times to work at Croome, and at the earl’s London house in Piccadilly. In fact, it was after an evening dining there with the earl in 1783 that Brown fell, hit his head, and subsequently died.

Some years later, the Earl erected a monument to Brown by the lakeside at Croome, inscribing it: ‘To the memory of Lancelot Brown, who, by the powers of his inimitable and creative genius, formed this garden scene out of a morass.’