At Petworth Park Capability Brown created a seemingly natural landscape of rolling lawns, serpentine lakes and belts of trees. In reality, the magnificent park and pleasure grounds he designed for Charles Wyndham, the 2nd Earl of Egremont, were the result of several plans and all of Brown’s expertise in planting and water engineering.

Between 1753 and 1765 Lord Egremont gave Brown five contracts worth a total of £5,500 (more than £9 million in 2015) to update the late 17th-century formal gardens and redesign the park at Petworth. The parterres, orange garden and huge terraces that had been fashionable in the early 18th century were largely swept away. Brown designed a new landscape for the estate surrounding Petworth House, which covers 263 hectares of a broad valley with steep slopes. He created vistas from the house across the two new lakes to the South Downs beyond, and designed serpentine walks and drives so that visitors could visit the Ionic Rotunda and Doric Temple and explore the wider estate.

The National Trust: www.nationaltrust.org.uk/petworth-house-and-park

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For more information about Brown and his work go to capabilitybrown.org/research
Capability Brown at Petworth

Two lakes
Brown created the Upper Pond at Petworth in 1753, under his first contract from Lord Egremont. His original design was for an even larger lake, but it's thought that he didn't want to dig into the sandstone of Lower Greensand, as this would have been more difficult to line. He turned existing ponds and ornamental canals into a new serpentine lake around 2.1 kilometres (1.3 miles) long, covering 6 hectares (15 acres) to the west of Lawn Hill. Islands in the lake were added after Brown's time.

In 1756-57, as part of his fourth contract, Brown designed and planted Lower Pond, on the eastern side of the park, bordering London Road. He also built an extensive drainage network to supply both of the new lakes.

Lawns and ha-ha
One of Brown's earliest jobs was replacing the existing formal gardens at the west front of Petworth House with a 400 metre-long lawn. To get his trademark smooth and seamless look involved draining and levelling the land, then sowing with hay seed and Dutch clover. He also removed a series of long terraces to the north-west, to form “1 fine undulated hill Adorned with groups of cedars, pines &c”.

In many of his schemes Brown used a ha-ha (sunken wall and ditch) to separate the pleasure grounds from the parkland and keep deer out, without spoiling the views. At Petworth the ha-ha is unusual because it takes the form of a stone retaining wall that rises above the level of the bank. It was planted along the top with a belt of evergreens.
Rotunda and pleasure grounds

Brown also improved the pleasure grounds at Petworth, which lie to the north side of the house. He designed new serpentine paths through this area, bordered with shrubs and trees. The account books for the estate show that he was using climbers like honeysuckle and sweet briar, as well as hellebores, lily of the valley and butcher's broom. A bill from March 1756 lists a mixture of 100 roses for the garden, including Damask, Rosa Mundi and Maidens Blush.

We don't know how all these plants were used, but the 1750s style of planting was to form theatrical rows, starting with the lowest bulbs and perennials and moving up to larger shrubs and then trees.

Brown also brought elements of the Arcadian style to the pleasure grounds – probably influenced by his time working under William Kent at Stowe. He moved the Doric Temple from the demolished rampart terraces (now Lawn Hill) and decided the site for the Ionic Rotunda on top of a steep, north slope.

Planting trees

Perhaps the most important element of Brown's new landscape at Petworth was the trees he planted in the pleasure grounds and bordering the park. We know that he bought trees from nurseryman John Williamson, and the estate records show both the varieties and sizes. These included evergreens like Scots pine (ordered at a height of 13 feet or more), Norway spruce and more than 200 cedar of Lebanon. Plane trees of 6-8 feet were also used, as well as other deciduous trees like larch and lime.

Around the edges of his plantations, Brown used laurel and other “shrubs and plants of low growth; that will not prevent the prospect” across the countryside. These shrubs would have been fenced against grazing fallow deer and helped to protect the young trees. Brown also kept some older trees in the park, including chestnuts, oaks and beeches.
Biodiversity at Petworth
At Petworth the parkland features support a variety of habitats including wood pasture and parkland, good quality semi-improved grassland, ancient woodland, replanted ancient woodland, deciduous woodland and coniferous woodland. The large lake provides important habitat for a range of breeding and wintering wildfowl. A herd of native Fallow deer graze the parkland.

Petworth after Brown
Later owners continued to develop Petworth in the years after Brown. When the park was enlarged again in the late 18th century new entrances and lodges were added and Brown's carriageways were no longer used. The 3rd Earl of Egremont expanded the Upper Pond and did further landscaping, as well as laying out the main rooms in the house to display his collection of art.

In 1816 the Upperton Monument was built as an eye-catcher at the north-west end of the park. In the first half of the 19th century the fashion for 'gardenesque' and 'picturesque' also saw the addition of a boat-house, bath-house and Monument Lodge with turrets.

Petworth today
Since 1947 Petworth has been managed by the National Trust, where the Grade I-listed house and grounds are open to the public. The current Lord Egremont still has close ties with the estate, a small area of which remains in private ownership.

The walking trail at Petworth covers three miles and allows visitors to see Brown's lakes, and planting from different vantage points, as well as views over the South Downs. The National Trust has also developed the Park Explorer, an innovative approach which enables visitors to access information about the history of the park on their smart phone.