Capability Brown created a magnificent landscape of lakes and woodland scenery surrounding the 17th-century house at Ugbrooke Park for the 4th Lord Clifford.

Brown had been asked to draw up plans for remodelling the house in around 1760, though the job eventually went to architect Robert Adam. Later, in around 1770, Brown began laying out a new park at Ugbrooke, adapting some elements of the formal design shown on an estate plan of 1740. Brown’s surviving plan is undated and there is no record of what he was paid. There is also an undated survey drawing that appears to show work in progress at Ugbrooke. It’s thought that Brown was working at Ugbrooke in 1772, when he was also drawing up plans for nearby Mamhead Park and for Tixall Hall in Staffordshire, the estate of Lord Clifford’s brother. There may have been a later Brown design, as some features that appear to be his work aren’t shown on his plan.

Ugbrooke: www.ugbrooke.co.uk

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For more information about Brown and his work go to capabilitybrown.org/research
New drives and approaches

In 1773 Lord Clifford was given permission to change the route of the road between Biddlescombe Cross and Winstow Farm, to run north of Castle Dyke Camp. This was done at Brown’s suggestion, so that the road would be out of sight of the house. Brown also smoothed out part of the eastern boundary road to remove the sharp bends shown on the 1740 plan by William Doidge.

The early 18th-century layout of the estate included a double avenue of trees leading to a semi-circular plantation to the east-south-east of Ugbrooke House. Brown partly removed this approach, forming the trees into clumps to block the access. Later surveys show that the drive was kept, but diverted away from the house.

Brown also built a new approach drive, from the north-west. He planned this as a winding but attractive carriage drive, passing through woodland and above the Lower Lake, crossing the dam and watersplash between the two pieces of water. It joined the south-west access drive for the final approach to the house.

As part of his design, Brown also planned to keep much of the avenue bordering the north-east approach to the house, breaking it up with selective removal of groups of trees.

As well as the main routes into the park, Brown is also thought to have proposed a group of minor tracks and paths through woodland and boundary belts. The drive along the north bank of the Top Lake isn’t on his plan and does not appear until the 1830 estate plan.
New plantations

Brown’s work at Ugbrooke shows his skill at incorporating existing mature trees and landscaping into his schemes. Carefully selecting what to remove and add, he created a natural looking landscape with tree clumps and boundary belts. His plan also shows a large number of new coniferous trees in the Winstow area and east of Ideford Arch.

Among the trees he planted to form his natural looking landscape were oak, Holm oak, Turkey oak and Spanish chestnut.

By 1779 the plan of Ugbrooke shows that most of Brown’s tree planting scheme had been carried out. It includes a boundary belt along the ridge of the north-west park boundary that doesn’t appear on his earlier design.

The lakes

Brown’s plan shows the Top and Lower Lakes, which he formed by damming the Ug brook, which runs through the valley to the north-west of the house, forming a cascade. A survey from 1779 shows the two lakes drawn on top of the course of the stream. There is an island in what was originally the Top Lake and the eastern end is forked to indicate that there were two sources of water. Brown showed his skill at contouring the landscape so that the parkland falls gently to the edges of the lakes.

The lakes at Ugbrooke were probably created when the rest of Lord Clifford’s ambitious project was well advanced. Views of the park and house by artist Francis Towne, dated around 1778, show the two lakes, but they aren’t on his 1775 view of Ugbrooke.

The Reverend Father Joseph Reeve published a poem ‘Ugbrooke Park’ in 1776, which mentions the stream and waterfall but not the lakes:

Spent in the windings of the skirting grove,
The Lingering current scarcely seems to move,
When lo! Abruptly from the rocky steep
Headlong it falls, and dashes down the deep.
Ugbrooke after Brown

Under the 6th Lord Clifford there were further improvements at the estate, including the stable block, added in 1793, and the lodges at Clapperland and Smoothway.

In the mid-19th century the upper end of Brown's Top Lake was separated to create a mill pool for the sawmills at the north and south of the lake. The main central part of what was Top Lake is therefore now called Middle Lake.

Later in the 19th century there was also new planting in the north-west of the park, including an oak avenue north of Middle Lake.

Biodiversity at Ugbrooke

At Ugbrooke the parkland features support a variety of habitats including wood pasture and parkland, ancient woodland, deciduous woodland, mixed broadleaved and coniferous woodland and habitats associated with the lake. Ugbrooke contains two Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Chudleigh Caves and Woods and Ugbrooke Park.

Chudleigh Caves and Woods include some of the best examples of semi-natural woodland developed on limestone in Devon. Interesting palaeontological discoveries have been made in some of the caves and while the main caves hold important bat roosts. Ugbrooke Park is of national importance for the conservation of lichens: two very scarce communities are present and these include nationally-rare species. For more information about these SSSIs please see www.capabilitybrown.org/garden/ugbrooke.

The Clifford family

Ugbrooke Park remains in the ownership of the Clifford family, who reoccupied the house after it was used as a school during the Second World War. The house and park are open to the public for part of the year and private guided tours are available at other times. Ugbrooke can be hired as a venue for weddings, parties and corporate events.

Though Brown’s landscape has been affected by modern agriculture and forestry the overall character of the historic core of the park remains as he planned it.