In 1767 Capability Brown made a survey and plan for extending the parkland and creating new lakes at the Wimpole Hall estate, a site of about 200 hectares that lies some 14 kilometres south-west of Cambridge.

Brown was one of many notable landscape gardeners who worked at the estate in the 17th and 18th centuries. His clients were the 2nd Earl of Hardwicke and Jemima, Marchioness de Grey, who paid him the sum then of £3,400 for redesigning the lakes, and forming a carriage drive and a perimeter belt of trees to the north of the property.

Brown had previously worked for the earl and his wife at Wrest Park, Bedfordshire, where he was given only a limited brief, as Jemima didn’t want to change the architectural character of the garden. However, when the earl inherited Wimpole in 1764 the couple again turned to Brown.

National Trust www.nationaltrust.org.uk/wimpole-estate
Particular thanks to Victoria McKeown at Wimpole
For more information about Brown and his work go to capabilitybrown.org/research
Wimpole’s “capabilities”

Jemima rated herself highly as a garden designer and tended to devalue Brown’s worth. Nevertheless, she wrote about Brown’s enthusiasm for Wimpole’s “capabilities”, saying “we tread Enchanted Ground… Mr. Brown has been leading me such a Fairy Circle and his Magic Wand has raised such landscapes to the Eye…”

The earl was more practical, writing to Brown on Christmas Eve 1767 to ask for a timetable of the works and expenses. He wanted the design to be finished by 1770 and paid £3,400 (£5.5 million in 2015), with staged payments of £200–£300 (320,000–£480,000 in 2015) every few months between 1767 and 1772.

Overall design

As Adshead describes, “at Wimpole Brown made use of all the landscape devices that characterize his approach.” He threw into one a great expanse of land that had previously been divided into fields by hedges and ditches, and crossed by tracks and roadways of medieval origin.”

A major part of Brown’s scheme for Wimpole was the joining of two medieval fishponds to create a single serpentine lake. He dug an additional lower lake to the east, twisting its two ends away from the viewer to create the illusion that it was a broad sinuous river. The weir he built to dam the water is disguised by a wooden Chinese Bridge. This area of “enchanted ground” was at least half a mile to the north of the Hall, where a dramatic chalk scarp rose above a line of springs in wet woods and boggy ground, the type of challenge apparently enjoyed by Brown.

The estate was enlarged significantly to the north taking in pastureland that had changed little since Benjamin Hare’s 17th century survey. Brown surrounded the new boundary with a belt of trees, comprising some of the 6,300 trees he ordered in 1769. He created a new carriage drive through the tree-belt, offering changing views back to the house with the lakes in the foreground. One of the most extraordinary features that Brown was able to provide was a view of the reflection of the house in the lake, although the lake is positioned at the base of the slope away from the house.
Perimeter woodland belts
Parkland
Capability Brown features
Gothic Folly
Serpentine Lakes
The Belts
Main Entrance
Arrington
Horse Common Plantation
Chinese Bridge
Wimpole Park
Wimpole Hall
Home Farm
Walled Garden
My Lady’s Pond
Visitor Centre
Refreshments
Toilets
Parking
Disabled Parking
500 yards
500 metres
The Gothic Folly
In 1751, the earl's father had asked architect Sanderson Miller to design a Gothic ruin or folly. As part of Brown's scheme the tower was finally built on top of Johnson's Hill. Brown used a line of plane trees on the dam to frame the view towards the folly, so that it acted as an eye-catcher from the house. Jemima approved of the raised setting, but commented that Brown had changed the design of the ruin, “That is, he has ‘Unpicturesqued’ it by making it a mere continuous solid object, instead of a Broken one.”

The 3rd Earl of Hardwicke took over the estate in 1790. He continued to develop the park and gardens, using landscape designers William Emes and Humphry Repton.

Biodiversity at Wimpole
At Wimpole the parkland features support a variety of habitats including wood pasture and parkland, lowland fen, ancient woodland, deciduous woodland, broadleaved woodland, traditional orchards and habitats associated with the lake.

Part of the site is the Eversden and Wimpole Woods Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), where six species of bat have been recorded and there is a nationally important summer maternity roost for the barbastelle bat. Find further information about Eversden and Wimpole Woods SSSI at www.capabilitybrown.org/garden/wimpole-estate.

Wimpole Hall today
The park and gardens at Wimpole Hall are now listed Grade I, and the estate has been run by the National Trust since 1976. Much of Brown's work at Wimpole, including the lakes, carriage drive and plantations of trees, can still be seen today. The estate reflects the mixture of influences by different owners and designers over a period of 300 years.