In the 1750s Capability Brown carried out a limited remodelling of the formal gardens at Wrest Park in Bedfordshire, altering the canals and planting trees. Jemima, Marchioness de Grey, inherited Wrest in 1740, shortly before her marriage to Philip Yorke, who later became the 2nd Earl of Hardwicke. In 1758 she called in Brown to work on the gardens. Jemima was keen to make changes, but didn’t want to destroy the character of the French-style gardens at Wrest. The Great Garden, based around the axial canal called the Long Water, had been laid out in the late 17th century by her grandfather.

Brown, who was famous for his serpentine lakes and winding carriage drives, was tasked with leaving many of the straight lines at Wrest unaltered. Though critics sometimes accused him of being a vandal, here his brief was limited and he acknowledged that to do more “might unravel the Mystery of the Gardens”.

English Heritage: www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/wrest-park
Particular thanks to Emily Parker at English Heritage
For more information about Brown and his work go to capabilitybrown.org/research
The canals

There is little information about what Brown did at Wrest Park. To the south of the site of the old house at Wrest Park is the Long Water, surrounded by the woodland planting of the Great Garden. At the end of this long straight canal stands the Archer Pavilion, a domed banqueting house.

The once formal design of the area between the pavilion and the water was changed, probably following Brown’s advice. It was replaced with a more natural-looking scheme by removing straight paths and planting clumps of trees.

Brown also softened the straight lines of the outer canals which flank the Great Garden and mark the boundary of pleasure grounds, and improved the drainage.

As part of her scheme for the garden, Jemima added a Chinese Summer House (listed Grade II) and Chinese Bridge, designed to fit in with Brown’s new scheme for the canals.

There is a sandstone ha-ha (sunken wall and ditch) at Wrest, lying east of the gardens and separating them form the parkland. These may date from the mid-18th century when Brown was at Wrest, but there is no evidence that he was involved.

Walpole on Wrest

Diarist Horace Walpole visited Wrest about four years after Brown, remarking on the “bold good taste” of Brown’s “hermitage and cold bath”. However, Brown did not actually design the mock ruined Bath House (now listed Grade II*). Walpole complained that the gardens were “very ugly in the old fashioned manner with high hedges and canals, at the end of the principal one of which is a frightful Temple designed by Mr. Archer”.

Chinese summer house © English Heritage

View of the long water © English Heritage
Capability Brown at Wrest Park

Main Entrance

Capability Brown features
1. Capability Brown Column
2. East Diagonal
3. Archer’s Pavilion
4. North-South Walks
5. Parkland
6. The Grove
7. Bath House Area
8. Encircling waters
★ Eye-catcher
↑ Viewpoint

Ha-ha

Specimen trees

Woodland or copse

Parkland trees

Shrubbery

Visitor Centre

Refreshments

Toilets

Parking

300 yards
300 metres
Monument to Brown

Despite the limited scope of Brown's work at Wrest, Jemima was pleased with what he had done. She had a monument built to him by architect Edward Stevens. The column, topped with an acorn-shaped urn, bears this inscription: “These gardens originally laid out by Henry Duke of Kent, were altered by Philip Earl of Hardwicke and Jemima Marchioness Grey, with the professional assistance of Lancelot Brown Esq. in the years 1758, 1759, 1760.”

The Brown column was originally placed near the Bath House, probably because it overlooked the beginning of the series of lakes he created. The column was moved to its present position in the 1830s.

Jemima and her husband had visited other Brown gardens at Holkham, Warwick Castle and Stowe. In 1767 they rewarded him with a major project at their Wimpole Hall estate in Cambridgeshire, where he was given more freedom to use his skills.

Biodiversity at Wrest Park

At Wrest Park the parkland features support a variety of habitats including wood pasture and parkland, ancient woodland, deciduous woodland, mixed coniferous woodland and habitats associated with the lakes.

Wrest Park today

The 2nd Earl de Grey built a new house in the 1830s, about 200 metres north of the site of the old one. He created the upper gardens, also in the French style, between his new house and the existing formal gardens.

The de Grey family sold Wrest Park after First World War. Over the next 20 years many of the trees in the park and avenues were cut down.

English Heritage now manages the house, gardens and part of the park, all of which are listed Grade I. Work is under way on a long-term project to restore the gardens to their pre-1917 state. Visitors can still see the Great Garden, Long Water and Archer Pavilion.