This guide has been created as part of a festival celebrating the 300th anniversary of the birth of Capability Brown in 1716.

The festival aimed to celebrate his work and encourage more people to visit and appreciate the landscapes he created. It was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and managed by the Landscape Institute.

To find out more about Brown’s work go to capabilitybrown.org.uk/research. For information on the individual landscapes he created go to capabilitybrown.org.uk/map.

Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown (1716-1783) was one of the UK’s most talented landscape architects, and he changed the face of Britain forever.

Born in the small Northumberland village of Kirkhale, Brown’s name is today linked with more than 250 estates, covering 200 square miles throughout England and Wales.

Brown popularised the English Landscape Style. Formal gardens gave way to naturalistic parkland with trees, expanses of water and smoothly rolling grass. This style because fashionable throughout Europe and beyond in the 18th century.

His talents were not limited to landscapes. He also designed great houses, churches and garden buildings, and was known for his skill in engineering, especially with water.
Natural landscapes
A landscape garden may often look completely natural but is, in fact, manmade. Brown believed that if people thought his landscapes were beautiful and natural, then he had been successful. He created gardens for pleasure that were also practical.

Brown’s genius was in his ability to quickly see how a work of art could be created out of parkland or an existing formal garden. His workmen moved huge amounts of earth and diverted streams or rivers to create the natural effect that he wanted. He drained land for grazing and planted woods for timber, so that the estate was productive as well as attractive.

A humble background
Brown was from a humble working family but had some education before training in gardening. His talent blossomed in the 1740s while he was Head Gardener at Stowe, Buckinghamshire, then the most famous garden of the day.

At Stowe he replace the ornate parterres and formal gardens with a smooth open lawn. His first masterpiece there was the romantic Grecian Valley. This included classical buildings, reflecting the fashion for antiquities, which became popular as rich young men went on the ‘Grand Tour’ of Europe as part of their practical.

Business Success
Brown set up his own business before he left Stowe in 1751. He combined his artistic talent, technical skills in architecture, engineering and landscaping, with sound business sense and scrupulousness.

His friendly nature and way of easing difficulties lead to an impressive list of clients that included six prime ministers and half the House of Lords. In 1764 he became the Royal Gardener to King George III. He built up a successful business with an annual income equivalent to over £20 million today. Brown was a driven man who criss-crossed the country for his work, but his letters show how dearly he loved his wife and children. His happy family life was interrupted by bouts of illness, but he continued to work hard until his death in 1783 aged 67.
Understanding Brown's landscapes
The illustration overleaf shows some of the key features of a Brown landscape. Brown wrote very little about his work, much of his advice was never written down and his plans have not always survived. So what we know about Brown's work has been pieced together from looking at the landscapes, letters and diaries, old maps, archives at the estates where he worked, Brown's one surviving account book and his bank records at Drummonds. The Capability Brown website includes summaries of what we know about his work at each site, as well as information on books and websites about Brown's work.

A costly business
Having your park landscaped by Brown was an expensive business. Brown's landscapes cost the equivalent of millions of pounds today. The calculator on www.measuringworth.com shows the cost of labour then and now and has been used to work out the modern values given on www.capabilitybrown.org.

Brown and biodiversity
By designing grassland and parkland trees, woodland and water parkland features, Brown created a mosaic of habitats, concentrated in one place, that provide plenty of homes for wildlife, some of them very rare. Today Brown's landscapes offer important refuges for wildlife and stepping stones for species to migrate between habitats in the more intensively farmed or developed landscape that often surrounds them.

The most important are the hundreds of existing trees he incorporated or new trees he planted which are now 300 to 1000 years old. They are important features as trees of great age, and for their open-grown character with huge trunks and spreading branches. The decaying wood and nooks and crannies are habitats for lichens, fungi and invertebrates such as beetles, as well as roosts for bats and birds.
Reading a Capability Brown Landscape

- **Park** The landscape style replaced enclosed formal gardens with sweeps of grass and water going right up to the house.
- **Drives** Brown designed long, curving drives so that visitors had impressive views of the estate as they approached the house.
- **House** The mansion was the focus for views to and from the park and was sometimes restyled to match the new landscape.
- **Lake** Water was used to enliven the middle of the landscape picture. Brown often hid the ends of a lake so it looked like a wide river.
- **Ha-ha** A deep ditch below the level of the grass, giving an uninterrupted view of the park. Animals could be seen grazing but could not stray onto the lawn.
- **Trees** Single trees and clumps of native varieties, such as oak, beech and sweet chestnut, were planted to break up the expanse of grass and frame views.
- **Cedar of Lebanon** Brown also used newly imported exotics, like the Cedar of Lebanon, which became known as his signature tree.
- **Woodland** was planted in a belt around the estate boundary, to hide service buildings, for timber or to create pleasure grounds with attractive rides or gravel walks.
- **Eye-catchers** Garden buildings, fine single trees and features outside the estate, such as a church spire, were used to draw the eye to the longer view.
- **Parkland features** such as a boat-house, or ice house were both decorative and useful while a rotunda, temple or menagerie gave a place to stop in the park.