

Capability Brown at Ashridge



Golden Valley © NT Images/Andrew Butler

The glorious Golden Valley is Capability Brown's crowning achievement at the Ashridge estate. He first visited Ashridge in 1759 at the invitation of Francis Egerton, 3rd Duke of Bridgewater, who paid Brown a great deal for work at the estate, though there is little information about what he did.

Brown's account book records payments from the Duke of £2,946 11s 7d (equivalent to £5 million in 2015) between 1759 and 1768, a remarkably large amount for making relatively few changes to the parkland. We know that Henry Holland, whose son later married Brown's daughter, was asked to build a new house in the 1760s on the site of the present orangery, so some of the money may have been connected with this.

The old-fashioned landscape was replaced with a new lawn, trees planted around the edges of the estate and in carefully placed clumps to create views of the estate.

The National Trust: <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/ashridge-estate>

Particular thanks to Benjamin Byfield and Mick Thompson at Ashridge for their help.

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



Capability Brown

Lancelot 'Capability' Brown (1716-1783) was born in the Northumberland village of Kirkharle, and went on to popularise the English landscape style, advising on over 250 large country estates throughout England and Wales.

Formal gardens gave way to naturalistic parkland of trees, expanses of water and rolling grass. He also designed great houses, churches and garden buildings, and was skilled in engineering, especially with water.

This guide was created as part of a festival celebrating the 300th anniversary of his birth. Find out more about the man and his work at capabilitybrown.org/research.

Portrait of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, c.1770-75, by Richard Cosway (17421821)/Private Collection/Bridgeman Images.



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Aerial view of Ashridge © NT Images

The 'Canal Duke'

The Duke of Bridgewater was engaged to be married when he commissioned Brown, but the marriage never took place and he turned his attention to building inland waterways. These projects helped usher in the Industrial Revolution and earned him the nickname of the 'Canal Duke'. His family had owned the estate, originally a monastic college, since 1604, when it was bought by his ancestor Thomas Egerton, Lord Keeper to Elizabeth I and Lord Chancellor to James I of England/VI of Scotland.

Until this point the Egertons had been living in the old medieval monastic buildings which were becoming very dilapidated. These buildings were hidden from the park by a high perimeter wall with two gatehouses for access. This would have seemed very old fashioned to Brown, who liked the lawn to flow all the way up to the front of the house. Some of the old wall, adjacent to the larger gatehouse, was demolished to make space to build the new house, directly bordering the newly expanded great lawn. The gate house was remodeled and connected to the house by a corridor.

Golden Valley

With its sweeping, woodland-fringed dips and curves, Golden Valley is classic Capability Brown. The informal clumps of trees to the north and east of the house shelter the building but allow views from the house to the darker woods beyond and, through vistas created earlier, to the open commons. The main view to the north, along the Ash Riding allee (tree-lined walk, now totally lost) ran to Ivinghoe Common, which was later turned into a park and is now within the listed historic landscape. The other views between Brown's copses on the main lawn are closed by a line of trees within the contemporary park boundary.



Ashridge house in 1822 by J Buckler, Ashridge Archive



Golden Valley by Rev'd Charlton Lane, c. 1860, by permission of the National Trust

Ashridge Estate

The views to the east finish at Cromer Wood on the eastern side of the Golden Valley, acting as a wood belt around the edge of the estate, a typical Brown feature. The village of Little Gaddesden to the North East is screened from the house by Brown's careful placement of the copses, mostly carved out of existing woods. All of this can be seen on Grey's map of 1762, which was made while Brown's work was in progress.

The famous Queen beech stood in one of the clumps here. This extraordinary tree was 41 metres tall and had 24 metres of clean trunk. In the early 1900s it was said to be the tallest beech in England. The most southerly clump extends right down the slope into the crook of a sharp bend in the valley, exaggerating its curving line. This clump also blocks the view to the south, creating a secluded atmosphere, but at the same time tempting the wanderer down the valley to find out what is beyond.

Creating vistas

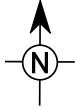
By a combination of felling and careful planting, Brown gave the wood along the north-east edge of the valley a satisfyingly sinuous edge. When viewed from either end of the valley, this creates the illusion of a progression of woods, one behind the other, fading into the middle distance. The planting on the south side of the valley is broken to allow views from the house down into the valley and glimpses from the valley back towards the house. Here the park opens out into a broad vista studded with occasional trees. From the higher vantage point of the house, this view was framed between two old avenues and encompassed a wide panorama of rolling countryside.



Autumnal woodland at Ashridge © NT Images/Chris Lacey

The access to the house followed the old direct routes used since medieval times. In a complete Brown design these would have been replaced by longer, more sweeping approaches. The current network of drives, cutting across the Brownian features, dates from the 1820s.

Capability Brown at Ashridge



Capability Brown features

- ① Golden Valley
- ② Great Lawn with clumps
- ↑ Viewpoint

- Woodland or copse
- Parkland trees
- Shrubbery

- Visitor Centre
- Refreshments
- Toilets
- Parking

300 yards
 300 metres

Kitchen garden

It is thought that Brown's work included the kitchen garden and ice house which are situated about a mile and a half away (the ice house near the mansion is later, dating from 1816-17). Brown commonly placed the kitchen garden well away from the house, so as not to interrupt the view. The payment of £100 (equivalent to £171,400 in 2016) on 26 Feb 1761 'to Mr Holland on account of the garden wall' in Brown's account book, is thought to refer to the wall of the kitchen garden.

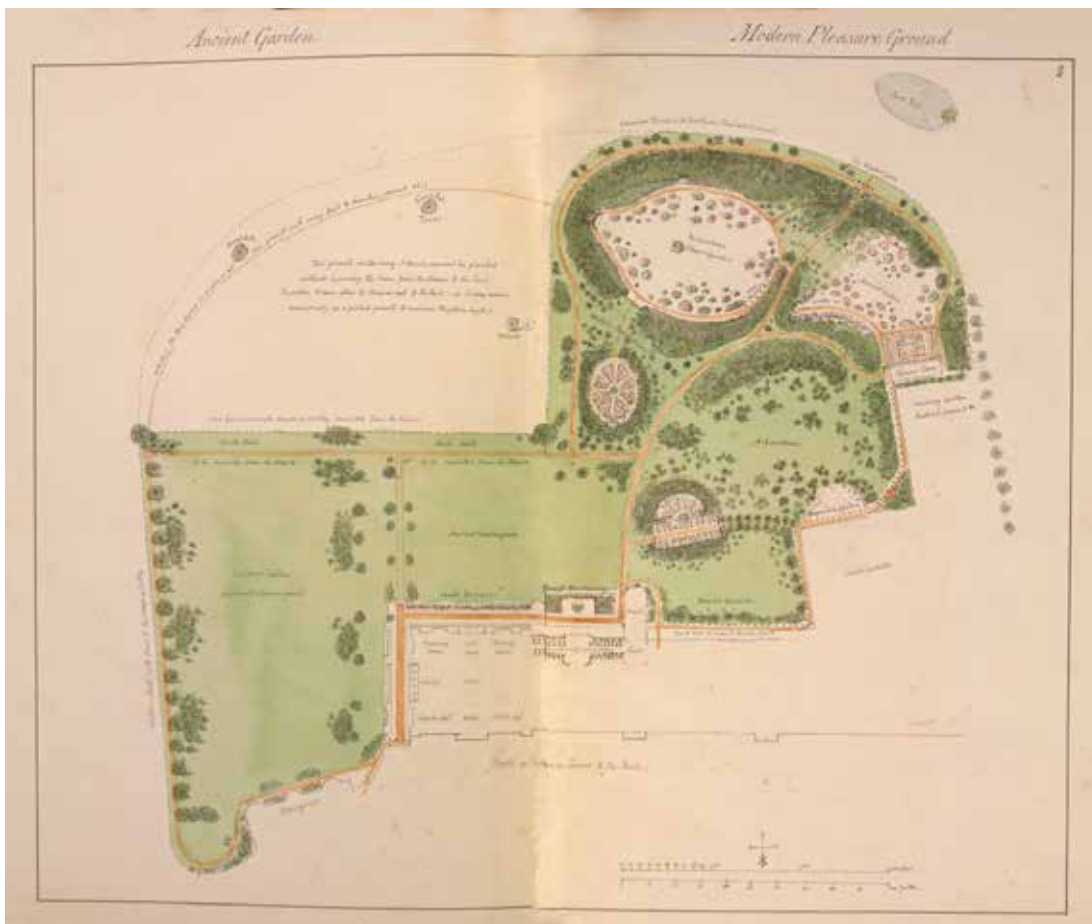


Ice house being surveyed
Credit: NT Archaeological Survey of the Ashridge Estate Volume IX

Repton's improvements

The Canal Duke's successor, his cousin the 7th Earl, was ostentatious and wanted to create a park to match the massive mansion he was building, designed by architect James Wyatt. In 1813 the Earl commissioned landscape gardener Humphry Repton, regarded as a successor to Brown.

Repton produced a portfolio of drawings and notes, an unbound Red Book (below) with proposals for a 'modern pleasure ground' to the south of the house in what he would later refer to as his 'collection of gardens'. There were proposals for fifteen gardens, including a rosarium and an arboretum of exotic trees. Repton's plan shows, in the eastern half, an 'ancient garden' which may record work by Brown on a garden to the south of the house built by Holland and which Repton may have left untouched as he concentrated his efforts on the western garden. There is no evidence that he did any major work in the surrounding park.



View of the Monument

In 1832 a monument was built to commemorate the Canal Duke, and perhaps the completion of the Grand Union Canal. The monument is a fluted granite column 33 metres high sited at the highest point of the estate, so that it could both be seen from the house and provide panoramic views from the top.

The Ashridge Estate passed sideways though inheritance to the Brownlow family in 1849. Under the third Earl Brownlow the estate continued to develop and many famous people stayed at Ashridge House.

Biodiversity at Ashridge Estate

At Ashridge Estate the parkland features support a variety of habitats including wood pasture and parkland, lowland heath, upland heath, ancient woodland and replanted ancient woodland, deciduous woodland, and broadleaved and mixed coniferous woodland. Ashridge Commons and Woods is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), supporting an exceptionally rich community of woodland breeding bird species including raptors, woodpeckers, chats, warblers, tits and finches. Of particular importance are species not often found elsewhere in the county, such as redstart, nightingale and wood warbler.

[Follow this link](#) for further information about Ashridge Commons and Woods SSSI.

Ashridge in the 20th Century

The story goes that the family burnt some of the archives in a great bonfire on the lawn when the whole estate was put up for sale in 1921. This may just be a story; certainly many records left the estate and ended up in Lincoln Record Office. A great deal of ancient woodland was felled for timber and a proposed Metroland style development would have covered much of the park. The local outrage at the potential destruction culminated in the 'Pennies for Ashridge' campaign, supported by the Daily Mail, and eventually the core of the park, along with some of the woods, commons and farmland was gifted to the National Trust. The National Trust has gradually added to this and now owns about 5,000 acres of the old estate, welcoming hundreds of thousands of visitors a year, free of charge. The house was bought by the Conservative party and eventually became the management college of today.



Ashridge Monument © NT Images