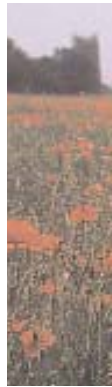


CROOME PARK

Discovering Concealed Capabilities



Cue Chris Beardshaw on the skyline recording a piece to camera. 'This must be the most visited garden in the world: every year thirty-six million of us pass right through the very heart of it, but we don't realize it's there,' he says. The camera pans away and shows a less than horticultural setting: a bridge over a motorway. The background white noise of traffic becomes clearer. 'In the 1960s the M5 was driven right through here, slicing in two one of our most important landscapes. This is Croome

Park.' Strangers to their surroundings, the unknowing garden visitors are driving along the M5, between junctions 7 and 8, where it joins the M50. The motorway cuts right down through the western edge of the park, usurping its beautiful borrowed landscape of the Malvern Hills on the western horizon.

Apart from the motorway, Croome Park is one of those most English of English landscapes. It is the earliest creation of that eighteenth-century genius Lancelot 'Capability' Brown in a career in that changed the face of much of the country. As your eye caresses its familiar, easy contours, pastoral images escape their chocolate-box clichés and come alive. You might even hear in your mind or from the television the soaring orchestral strings of essentially English music. This is Elgar country. The Severn valley. The heart of England. You could almost say that the heart of England cliché was coined here 250 years ago, when a young jobbing architect created an epitome of the river Severn at the command of an ambitious young landowner. (What mental pictures would Elgar's music evoke without Brown's landscape?)

This is also Beardshaw country. Chris grew up near here, at Pershore, a bike ride away, and the majestic oaks and decaying buildings hidden in this landscape were fun to explore. Here were sown the seeds of a deeper curiosity. That curiosity is blossoming now, and from his knowledge of garden history Chris gives us perspectives on the hidden history of Croome Park.

The task of restoring Croome raises questions of perception: how different is what we now see as a 'Capability' Brown landscape from



An Outline of the Plot

Croome Park is one of the most significant landscapes in England. Its design was commissioned by the sixth Earl of Coventry, who pursued a vast programme of landscape improvement from 1747 until his death in 1809. Lord Coventry employed a great number of distinguished architects and craftsmen at Croome, but it is for the pioneering work by Lancelot 'Capability' Brown (1715–83) that Croome is most renowned. At Croome Brown established the English Landscape Style that was to be admired and copied throughout the western world, and in turn Croome made Brown's reputation.

The combination of beauty and economic efficiency – a vision of ideal nature – that characterized Croome in its heyday has faded with time, and in recent decades modern land management has undone much of the texture and detail of the design.

The Croome Estate Trust and the Coventry family maintained the estate until 1981. Today Croome Court is now in private ownership. The National Trust bought 670 acres of the designed landscape in 1996. Now, in its most ambitious garden restoration project to date, the Trust is tackling the huge task of returning Croome Park to its former glory – to the way it looked as it matured around 1800. Buildings and statues are being restored. The lake and river are being cleared of choking weeds. Trees and acres of shrubbery are

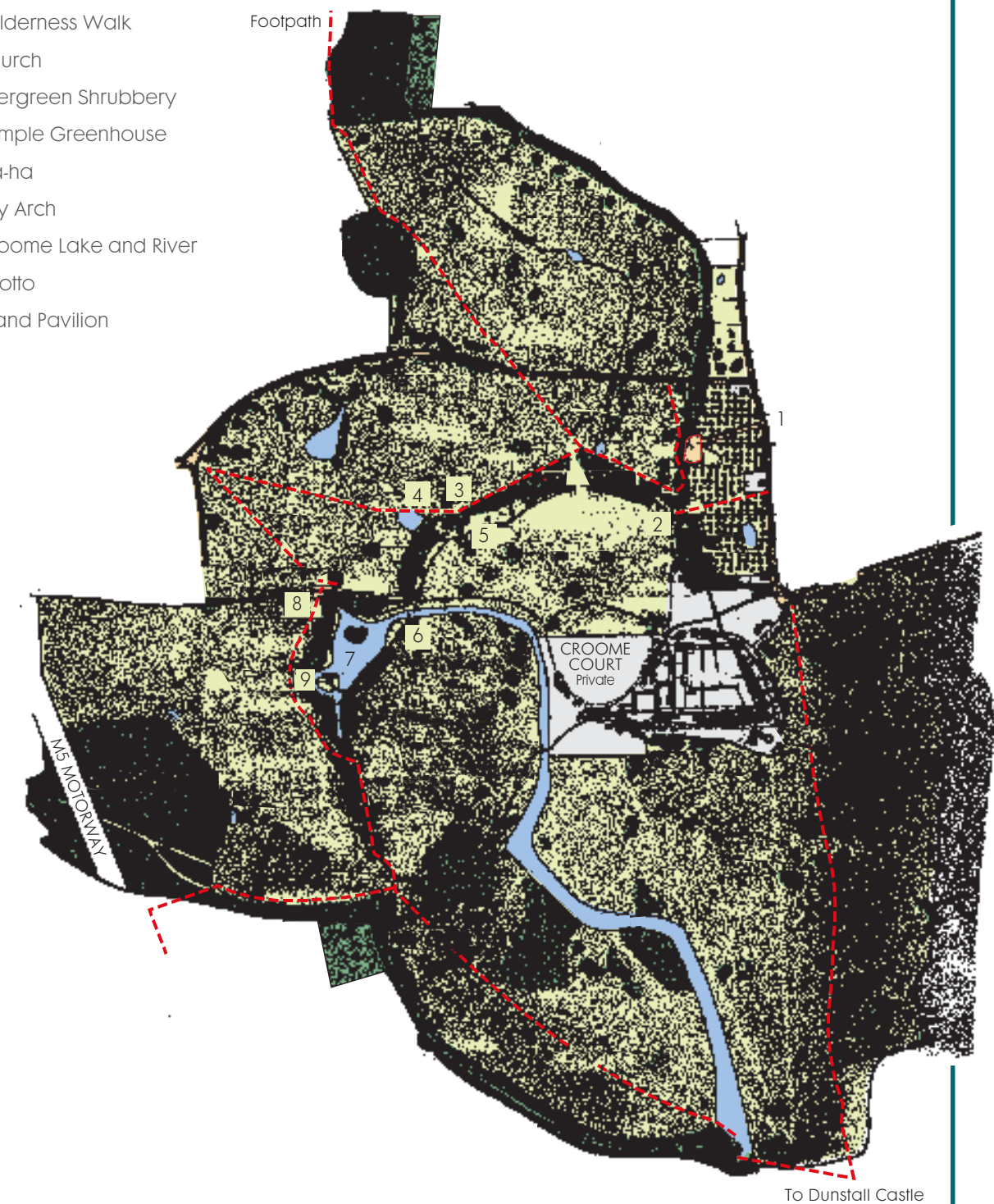
being replanted. Grazing rather than arable farming will re-create the green pasture that links the elements into a whole.

Behind this restoration work lies a wealth of expertise. Together with the wonderful estate records and archives maintained by the Croome Estate Trustees, the project is revealing all sorts of hidden knowledge and adding volumes to our understanding of the making of the eighteenth-century landscape.



The Rotunda

- 1 Wilderness Walk
- 2 Church
- 3 Evergreen Shrubbery
- 4 Temple Greenhouse
- 5 Ha-ha
- 6 Dry Arch
- 7 Croome Lake and River
- 8 Grotto
- 9 Island Pavilion



To Dunstall Castle

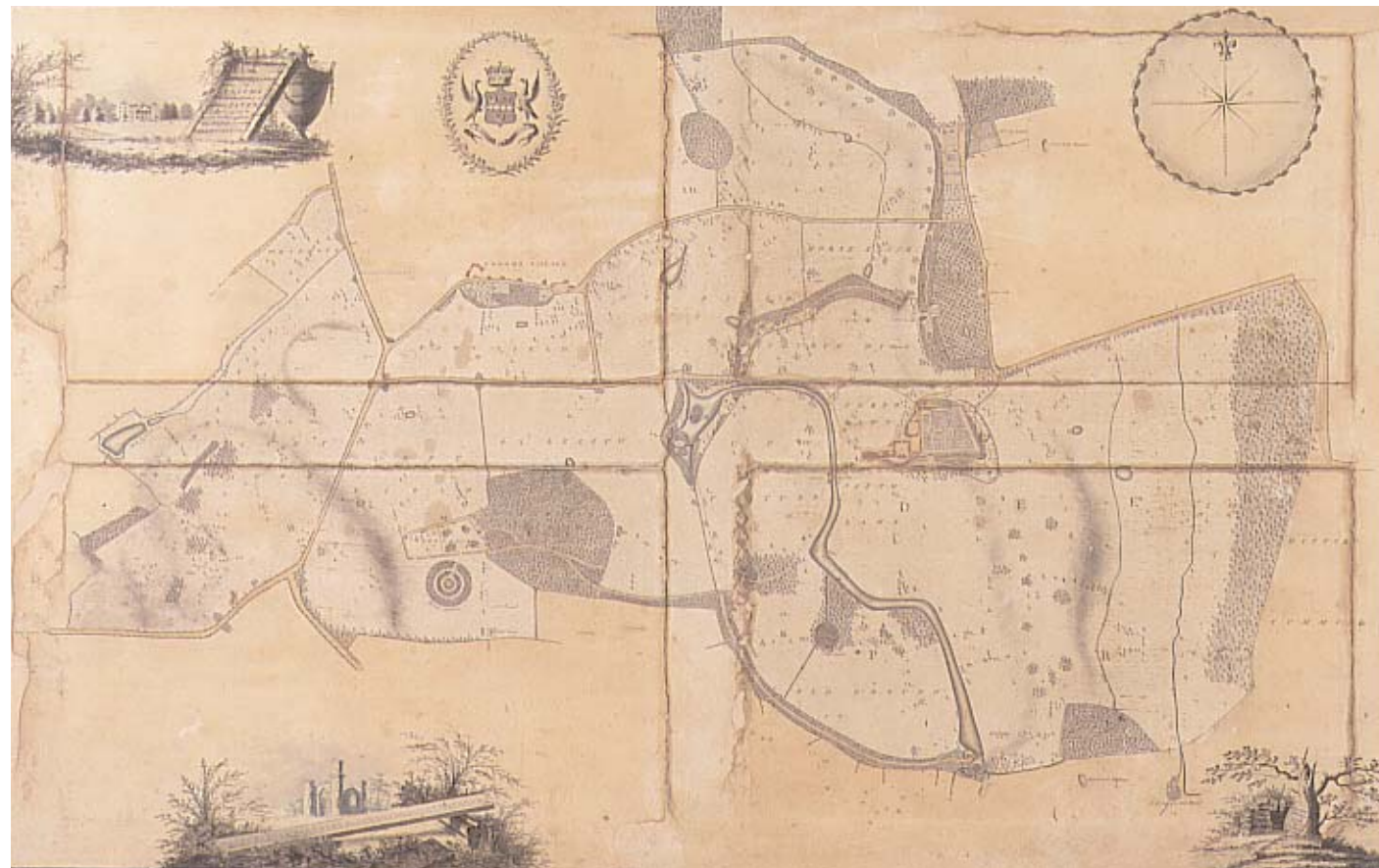
the original? Perhaps more than anything, this restoration helps to reveal a huge hidden world, the labour and the loss that went into the making of these apparently glorious landscapes of the eighteenth century. Our chapter follows two 'hidden' themes: what lies beneath the surface, and the plantings that have disappeared but characterized the authentic Brownian landscape.

Records Restorers Dream Of

The estate map drawn by John Snape in 1796 shows Brown's design as it matured. The National Trust is restoring the remaining garden to around this date. At bottom left is a sketch of Dunstall Castle, the 'ruin' Robert Adam designed for Lord Coventry for a vista from your house'.

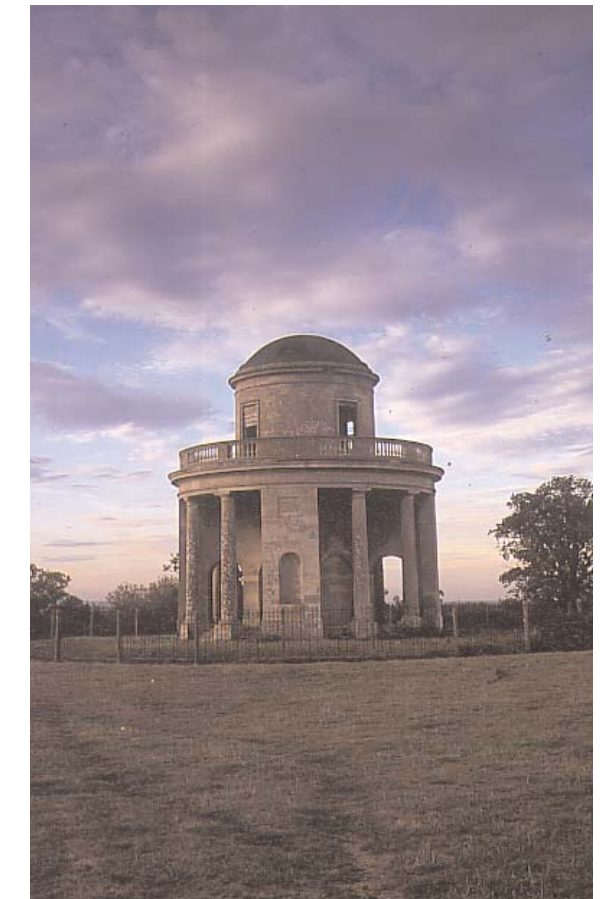
Is it because so many of us drive through Croome Park without knowing it that Croome counts as a Hidden Garden? Partly. Croome has also been overlooked by many garden historians: if it appears at all in books on the period, it tends to get a mere passing mention as one of Brown's early designs before the author goes on to more meaty matters.

It turns out that the English word 'garden' is an elastic term, and the Croome project stretches it to its limits. At Croome it is expected to encompass a vast acreage of park and landscape.



A Hidden Gardens criterion is also the fact that the landscape is undergoing 'restoration' in the best garden history sense (as defined by Sylvia Landsberg, see page 23): 'sufficient remains have survived to enable the garden to be returned to its former glory'. Croome also excels in the 'reconstruction' department, with abundant documentary evidence to complement the physical remains on the ground. The Croome Estate Trustees have superb, largely untapped archives. The estate records for Croome turn out to be among the most complete of any historic landscape and there are three fine estate maps from 1763, 1796 and 1810. The information they contain is so accurate that GPS positioning and geophysics confirm the routes of paths, areas of planting and even the position of individual trees. There is also an unimagined wealth of letters and papers, bills and plant lists.

Contemporary comments written by visitors naturally call for a pinch of salt, but confirm that the effect was impressive. Some are quoted by William Dean, the head gardener, who wrote a guide book to Croome as the plantings came of age in 1824. This slim volume is valuable on several levels – aside from its vitally important plant list, the 'Hortus Croomensis', of which more later. You might expect Dean's tone of fulsome praise and sentences of Proustian length to make it dismissable as a period piece rather than an objective description. (The Worcester type-setters were not short of a comma or two.) It is useful, however, partly as an account by someone who knew the site inside out, and partly because it conveys vividly the vision that the visitor was expected to share. Or the visions, plural, because this was essentially a landscape to be discovered from a series of different viewpoints as you moved through it. Mr Dean (aided by an anonymous friend) engagingly personified his reader: 'In the course of a walk through it, it is proposed to point out to the stranger, some of the principal objects, worthy of notice.' We – readers, viewers, visitors – are now invited to step into the shoes of Mr Dean's 'stranger'. We can admire and wonder. But we today also have the benefit of hindsight (and a measure of undercover information) to guide us through the historic landscape.



The Panorama Tower was built as an eyecatcher to stand on Knight's Hill, Cubsmoor, at the western extremity of the park. James Wyatt based the design on Adam's ideas. Today it lies outside the Croome Park estate, to the west of the M5, and still acts as an eyecatcher.

The Grave Young Lord and the Capable Young Brown

The young lord George William was grave (in Horace Walpole's description) because in unexpectedly inheriting his title he had lost his closest friend – his brother Thomas, Lord Deerhurst, just one year older, with whom he had studied at Winchester and Oxford, and with whom he planned a career in politics. Out of the blue Thomas died in

1744 at the age of 23. Catherine Gordon, in her splendid account of Croome, attributes the single-mindedness with which the sixth earl threw himself into improving the family estate in some part to 'an overwhelming sense of duty, a passionate desire to fulfil the expectations of his brother, and compensate for his own sense of unworthiness and inadequacy'. George William was also a highly cultured individual in the happy position of possessing a large fortune commensurate to his tastes.

The estate was settled on George William, the new Viscount Deerhurst, in 1748, and he then inherited the earldom when his father, the fifth earl, died in 1751. Croome Park, to which he now turned his attention, was not entirely a blank canvas. It was already the largest estate in Worcestershire when his father, William Coventry, had inherited in 1719, somewhat against the odds. (The line of inheritance took unexpected twists in the years before his turn came: Nash, the county historian, claimed that

'nearly forty persons died, any one of whom would have inherited before him'.) The fifth earl rose to the task. He embarked upon a sequence of modest improvements, almost doubling the annual rental income in fifteen years. Astute land management was the order of the day, and the earl did what his peers were doing. Trees were planted, land drained and new farm buildings constructed. Parcels of land were exchanged to consolidate the area of parkland around the house, and other land was enclosed into fields.

George William continued this process after his brother's death in 1744, gradually formulating grander and more ambitious ideas. Again,

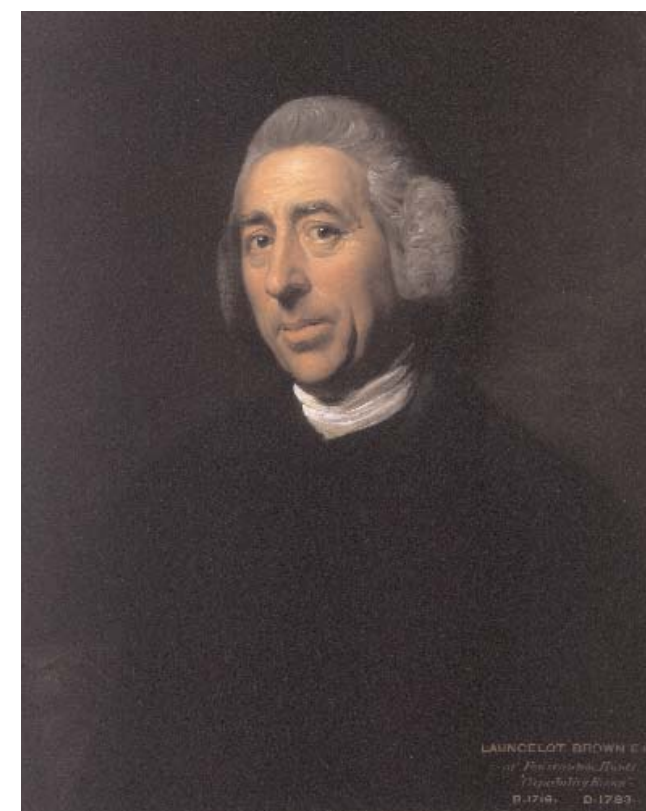
the economic tide was in his favour. The number of leaseholders was neatly reduced between 1749 and 1750 by doubling the rent. With the help of one John Phipps, George William began to take stylistic steps in parallel: as his friend Sanderson Miller wrote, his 'Lordship's spirit of improvement begins to exert itself'. The formal gardens around the house were swept away – by John Phipps, before 'Capability' Brown appeared. New hothouses were built and pineapples planted. An artificial river was completed by 1748, describing a simple curve round to the south-west of the house and terminating in a grove of trees. William Halfpenny built a Chinese bridge over the 'river'. A survey made by John Doherty in about 1751 shows these improvements to be a hotchpotch, lacking cohesion. Capable help was at hand.

The catalyst was George William's gentleman-architect friend Sanderson Miller, who visited Stowe, where Lancelot 'Capability' Brown was head gardener, in November 1749. He was shown around by Brown, whom he invited to his estate at Radway in Warwickshire the following summer. Here, it seems, Brown was introduced to the new Lord Deerhurst. Something clicked between them. By 1751 Lancelot 'Capability' Brown was designing a new Palladian exterior to the house at Croome Court for Deerhurst, now Lord Coventry. His brief rapidly grew to encompass the wider landscape.

Brown worked intermittently for Lord Coventry between 1751 and his death in 1782. There were two concentrated periods during 1751–6 and 1762–6. Brown remodelled the Jacobean house using Bath stone and built the offices, stables and church. Part of the house interior and the church interior were entrusted to Robert Adam, who worked at Croome from 1760 and again around 1779. In the park Brown did initial designs for the Rotunda, Sabrina's Grotto, the Dry Arch, the Island Temple and the wooden bridges in the garden (though most of these were altered later). Robert Adam designed most of the important buildings in the park – the Temple Greenhouse, the Alcove or Park Seat, the London Arch and the Pier Gates. James Wyatt completed some of this work



George William Coventry (1722–1809) became sixth Earl of Coventry in 1751. A man of taste and culture, his wealth from agricultural 'improvements' enabled him to patronize many of the most distinguished artists and craftsmen of the day. He was painted by Allan Ramsay in c1765.



Lancelot 'Capability' Brown (1715–1783), painted by Nathaniel Dance in about 1770. Croome Park was a landmark in Brown's early career, and he continued to be involved in its development into the 1760s. By the time of this portrait Brown's relationship with Lord Coventry was one of friendship rather than service.



Richard Wilson painted the remodelled Croome Court in 1758. How useful are historic paintings like this to garden restorers and garden detectives? What allowance should be made for idealization and artistic licence? Close observers of Croome know that the church, relocated from behind the house, was not completed until 1763. The viewpoint Wilson chose is very much the same as that of the photograph on pages 36–7.

after Adam's death. The catalogue of the other skilled workers Lord Coventry employed at Croome and elsewhere reads like a Who Was Who in top interior design (from Robert Adam to the Venetian painter Antonio Zucchi) of the best part of the eighteenth century.

It's no more possible to encapsulate Capability Brown's career in this small space than to squeeze a shrubbery into a flowerpot. Brown's genius lay in 'seeing' what was not yet there. He could make slight gradients look like soaring slopes, and could enable others to see in that way too. His ability embraced engineering and classical architecture, though the actual construction of his buildings might be done by other hands. Here we concentrate on what Croome must have meant to Brown and vice versa. Two strands predominate, the drainage and the plantings.

The house lay in a shallow bowl, with rising ground to the east. Brown remodelled the terrain and used trees in clumps, belts and shrubberies to make the most of views to and from the house. A new lake was made and the artificial river was enlarged and moulded into its present Severn-like meandering course, with its source in Sabrina's Grotto. One of Brown's triumphs was the installation of a 'back-to-front' ha-ha. The normal ha-ha assures a seamless view from the house with its surrounding mown lawns to the smooth grazed turf of the adjacent parkland. 'Pleasure ground and park continued to be distinct entities – the former maintained by gardeners, the latter by livestock – but the widespread adoption of the ha-ha was bringing them into increasing visual integration, and thus ensured the continued migration of aesthetic features out from the former to the latter' (Tom Williamson, *Polite Landscapes*). For Brown, the views from the park of the house in its setting were as important as those from the house.

One of the most radical, albeit subtle, differences between today's landscape and that of Brown's day is the texture of the sweeping expanses of grass – the 'connecting medium'. William Dean wrote of 'the rich verdure...animated with an abundance of hares and other game, in busy or sportive action; and with flocks and herds, browsing on the grass, or reposing in the shade'. (He specified that the cows were of the Holderness and Alderney breeds.) In recent decades the profit of the land has been derived from cereals, and one of the National Trust's aims is to restore a grazing regime. Dean thought it not 'improper to remark that when the park is thus brought into close contact with the house and the pleasure grounds; and forms the connecting medium, between them and the surrounding country: it should, nearer home, partake of the neatness and elegance of the one; and, at a greater distance, show something of the natural wildness of the other.' Isn't this how natural garden designers are telling us to vary our grass mowing today? '...the great Designer of Croome...has allowed the park scenery, round the house, to take a higher polish – whilst, at a distance, and towards the boundaries, the woods already begin to assume, and, with advancing time will assume, more and

'In carrying his vast plans into effect, it must be owned, the noble improver did not niggardly spare the cost – since, it is said that he has, here, expended no less a sum than four hundred thousand pounds.'

William Dean

more, of the wild grandeur of forest scenery.' The landscape became a model of agricultural and productive efficiency as well as beauty. It also became the acme of state-of-the-art horticultural practice and up-to-date plant interest.

Judicious and Extensive Drains

One of the points stressed by many of the eighteenth-century commentators was the way the landscape had been transformed. A correspondent to the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1792 was 'charmed, in the highest degree, as to the gratification of my eyes'. Not only had he never seen a more perfect spot, nor any kept in such perfect order, but: 'A vast extent of ground, formerly a mere bog, is now adorned with islands and tufts of trees of every species; and watered around, in the most pleasing, and natural manner, possible.' Mr Darke, in the First Agricultural Survey of 1794, was particularly keen on the drains. 'The most skilful drainer I know...was the late Earl of Coventry. His part of the country was a morass, not more than half a century back: but is now perfectly dry, sound for sheep and other cattle. It may justly be called a pattern farm for the whole kingdom, from its well-formed plantations, and its judicious and extensive drains.'

One of the attributes of genius is to make its achievements seem effortless. 'Here is seen a fine expanse of water – which Art has formed, but which Nature might own,' apostrophized William Dean. 'It is a scene of calm delight; the majestic repose of nature; where all is serene and solemn; infusing a deep, enthusiastic, almost awful stillness into the mind, which may be felt but cannot be described.' The surface view still impresses, but what infuses awe into Chris Beardshaw's mind is the extraordinary amount of hidden hydraulic expertise that went into the making of this picturesque perfection.

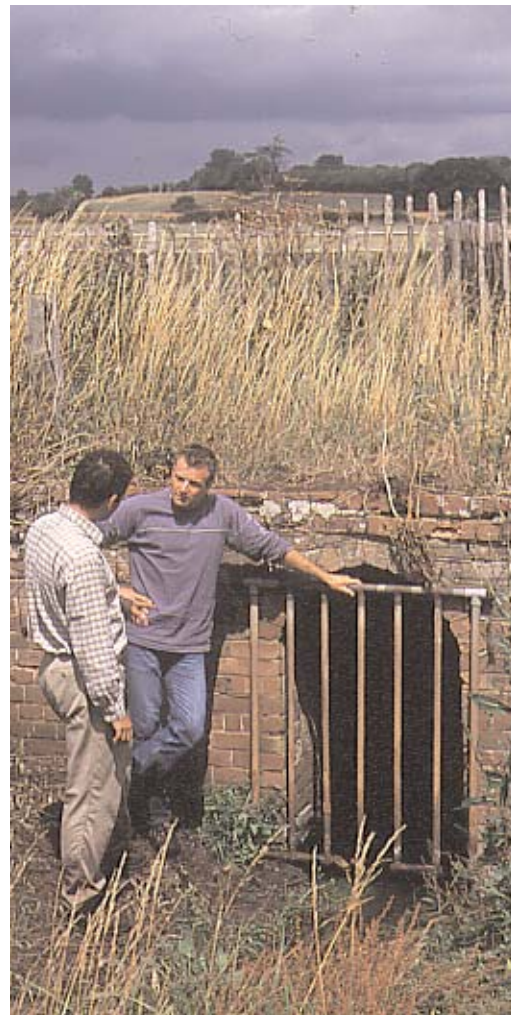
The person who makes drainage sound positively lyrical is Nick Haycock who is the consultant hydrologist employed by Jamie Whitehouse and his restoration team. We are accustomed to admiring the classical buildings and ornaments that Brown dotted about the landscape – artistically, we might say. But we learn that what is truly

admirable are the quality and contours of the limestone watercourses that run out of sight underground. Therein lies his finest Art.

It seems that Lord Coventry wanted a river frontage. He wanted something that looked like the river Severn not far away, meandering in generous serpentine loops. Brown planned a Severn in miniature: a one-fifth-scale version, a mile-and-a-half (2.4km) long, of the course of the river on the boundary of the Croome estate. Brown later became famous for his 'rivers', yet this first one was probably made at the request of Lord Coventry. It was to be a steep learning curve.

The Severn provided the inspiration but also caused a large part of the problem. The ground was naturally a boggy mire, or 'a morass' as Brown's memorial at Croome states in capital letters. Impossible to cultivate for crops, it was grazed by cattle. The landscape was formed by one of the many courses of the Severn charged with glacial meltwaters before it reverted to its current course at the foot of the Malverns some four thousand years ago. Two distinct geologies meet here: heavy, compacted, blue Jurassic clay and the sticky, claggy red clays of the Triassic. They are overlaid by a mosaic of glacial gravel deposits and silt. Although he could read the vegetation as well as any modern ecologist and know that plants like silverweed and horsetail are indicators of damp ground, Brown presumably would not know what kind of substrate he would encounter in any given spot where he sank his spade.

Brown's vision was one of clarity. He wanted a clear, reflective water surface – essentially a classical concept. He also wanted a seamless pastoral landscape sweeping up to the house, so there was no question of visible drains and ditches. Everything had to go underground. He must have begun in the area around the house. Nick Haycock points out a splendid brick-lined culvert almost high enough to walk through near the house. Others are square limestone drains with flagstones on top. 'There's one drain a mile-and-a-half [2.4km] long, and we now know the drop on that is only 6 inches [15cm],' he marvels. 'That's the precision of Roman engineers. It's fantastic engineering.' Brown sometimes dug down 8 feet (2.5m) or so to lay a drain. Nick estimates they used about two-



Hydrologist Nick Haycock explains the logic of Croome's waterworks to Chris Beardshaw. Brown's enduring underground architecture is as important to the site as the classical buildings above ground.



Before restoration Brown's artificial Croome River – created in the eighteenth century 'where no river ran' – is hidden from sight by rank vegetation and marginal weeds. Capability Brown envisaged a tract of clear water, visible from a distance. Whether the margins were to be kept clear by grazing stock or scything gardeners is unknown.

and-a-half million bricks. The drains were tough, too. Some of the structures began to collapse only in the last ten or fifteen years under the weight of heavy modern farm machinery used at harvest. And all this before he ‘really started to carve up the landscape’ – grade down the slopes and flatten out the flood plain. It was all tied in to view lines to ‘sweeten up’ the views from the house. The scale of the effort and the cost seem unthinkable today.

And then – Brown’s river didn’t work. He was a victim of his own success. He created too effective a drainage system. It collected all the winter water and shot it straight into the lake and river with the result that the site was bone dry in summer, and the water level in the lake became too low. It takes an enormous amount of water – ‘We’re talking about a whole winter’s rainfall to fill it,’ says Nick Haycock. Brown was forced to go further and further afield to bring water in to top up the lake.

There was another problem. The varying geology meant that in some places the lake was over impermeable clay, but elsewhere the substrate consisted of loose sands and gravels, and here they had to introduce a puddled clay lining. During the restoration Nick Haycock and his team are discovering a patchwork of different sections. There was always an assumption that Brown would have puddled the whole area with clay to make it watertight. ‘But you’re talking about 20 acres (8ha) of water – that’s a big area to puddle.’ The Croome Estate archives show that Lord Coventry was constantly writing letters to Brown saying, ‘We’re losing water, please come back!’

Paradoxically one of the National Trust’s restoration strategies is to restore some of the ‘morass’ that was so proudly eliminated in the eighteenth century. Ecologists now recognize that the old wetlands were sponges, holding the winter water and releasing it slowly during the summer to keep the flow going. Brown too must have come to realize that you couldn’t let all the water flow away into the lake but had to hang on to some of it, and that the land needed a steady supply. His later schemes involved additional reservoirs, extra supplies of water. Chris wonders to what extent the watercourses he made at other sites like Blenheim owe their success to what he learned here in this very

It takes the right viewpoint and the right light to see the ‘mirrored water’ that Capability Brown had in mind. A handful of the trees, like the cedars reflecting in Croome Lake, date from his time.



difficult site: 'It really did set him up and he did become a kind of water specialist.'

Incidentally excavating the new wetlands is providing material to create a berm or bank between the main park and the motorway, helping to screen out noise and pollution once trees are planted. It's a huge task, involving dozens of bright yellow and orange diggers and dozers, each shifting in a load what Lord Coventry's locals would have taken a day to move. Capability Brown would have been impressed.

Grounds for Pleasure

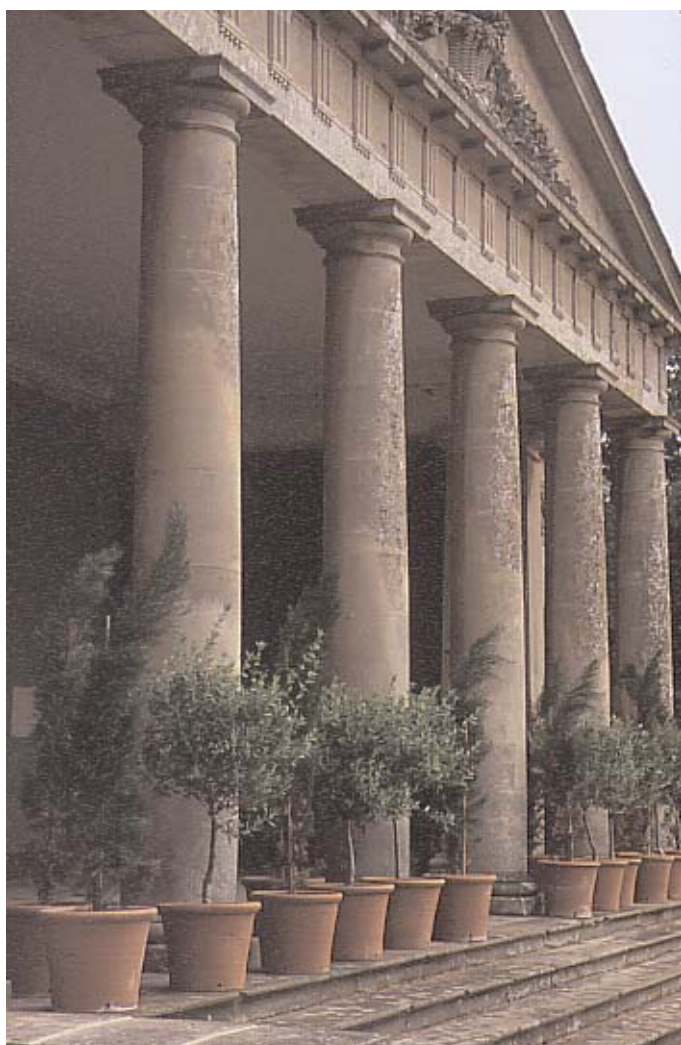
In common with visitors to Croome, who often have only a couple of hours to 'do' this great garden, we will have to whiz through, pausing at what catches our interest. By the late eighteenth century, when more

The island in the lake at the western end of Brown's river is linked to the 'mainland' by two fine bridges displaying early examples of wrought ironwork. The 'stranger' visiting Croome for the first time is enticed to cross a bridge to inspect Robert Adam's Island Pavilion, with its Coade stone reliefs.



land had been added to the estate, there were two principal circuits: a 3-mile (4.8km) walk and a 10-mile (16km) ride. (We have two-and-a-half centuries to cover, too.) Besides the second Lady Coventry's Menagerie on Cubsmoor (where exotic rare birds vied with architecture by Adam), particular attractions were the Wilderness and the Arboretum, which had more than 300 exotic trees (and where the young botanist might be aided and gratified 'to find the botanical

The Dry Arch (Brown's idea) allowed visitors making the circuit on foot to pass beneath the main carriageway from the west without interruption and see the lakeside gardens.



The Temple Greenhouse or conservatory made an important feature in the landscape among the trees between the church and the foot of Church Hill. Robert Adam's first park building, designed in 1760 for 15 guineas, it was fitted with large removable sash windows to protect the tender plants that were overwintered inside.

name of every tree painted on sticks, and thrust into the ground, near the roots of each'). A key attraction was the Flower or Botanic Garden, with a rockwork pool, a conservatory for Chinese plants and exotic houses dedicated to plants from the East and West Indies and the Cape. Many of the plants were collected by members of the family and by friends, but a great number were purchased from the burgeoning nursery trade in exotics. By 1801 Arthur Young (*Annals of Agriculture*) rated Croome as second only to Kew botanical garden.

Papers from the 1760s onwards document the acquisition of some of these plants and serve as a gazetteer of plant exploration. William Dean's 'Hortus Croomensis' is the culmination of a growing collection. It lists some 5000 plants grown at Croome in the form of a 140-odd-page catalogue, from *Abroma* (defined as an East Indies Stove shrub) to *Zygophyllum* or Bean Caper from Syria and the Cape of Good Hope (defined as a greenhouse shrub). William Dean or his publisher had an astute eye on the gardening book market. A number of the subscribers to Dean's book were nurserymen, and at the end he included useful

advice on propagating some of the novelties, as well as recipes for the best compost mixtures for various new exotics.

The first Lady Coventry, born Maria Gunning (1732–60), was a townie. In 1764 Lord Coventry remarried. Barbara, the daughter of the tenth Baron of St John of Bletsoe, who brought with her a large dowry and an active interest in Croome. In return Lord Coventry promptly gave her the menagerie, and a model farm and model dairy as a source of pin-money. Best of all she was interested in horticulture. She often mentioned seeds and plants in her correspondence with her sister. 'You have made mine the best furnished greenhouse in this country. The seeds from Botany Bay are not yet come. I will send some to you as soon as I have them.' The letter is undated, but Botany Bay appeared on the horticultural map when Captain James Cook returned from his groundbreaking voyage in 1771.

When garden history focuses only on architecture and style, a vital dimension is missing – the plants that vitalize the picture. There should be no danger of this at Croome. The planting bills and lists in the archives track every aspect of the estate, and bring alive the buildings, as when Dean writes of the temple: 'This building being closed up, in front, with glass windows, is used as a greenhouse in winter: and when these are removed, it becomes an agreeable summer apartment.' Nor was garden appreciation all aesthetics and serious admiring of prospects. There were visitors to entertain. The new garden buildings and parkland at Croome made a perfect setting for boating parties, picnics and firework displays. Bills from a firework artist in Holborn itemize Chinese Trees of Silver Flowers, Italian Suns, Roman Candles, Gold Flower-pots and Water Rockets.

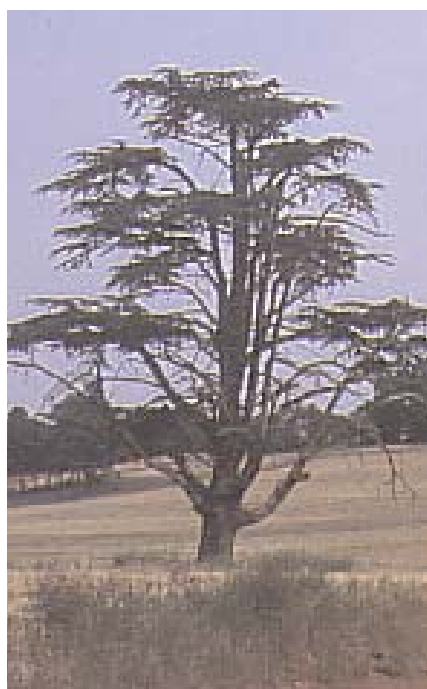
But there was serious plantsmanship and plants-oneupmanship too.

What the Plant Lists Tell

You find boatloads of elms being sent upriver from Gloucester in the 1740s and men being paid a penny a day for planting trees. Species might be ordered as seed, mast, acorns, chestnuts (this suggests they must have had vast nursery areas); but sometimes the landowner or his agent are not willing to wait, and order the more expensive seedling trees.

Croome Park's apparently natural beauty was achieved only by means of extensive underground drains, which lasted 250 years until heavy agricultural machinery began to damage them. This is the last of the arable crops: after the 2003 harvest the land is being reseeded as pasture, and additional trees such as oaks will be planted.





Above Veteran trees like oaks and this cedar of Lebanon are familiar markers in Capability Brown landscapes; isolated relics of originally larger groups.

Opposite Shrubberies are far more evanescent. Croome's Wilderness Walk near the church was replanted with plants of Lord Coventry's period in 1998.

grown vegetables as well as asparagus plants and seed potatoes (sometimes the 'red-nose kidney' variety) and mushroom spawn is ordered for the mushroom house. There are hardy fruit trees for an orchard or training on the kitchen-garden walls. (Dean recorded that the home shrubbery sheltered 'a 7-acre kitchen garden well stocked with fruit trees; and well furnished with pineries, vineries, and peach houses,' and we duly find vines, pineapples and melons on order.)

But it is the ornamental plants newly imported from a number of distant continents that mark milestones in Britain's horticulture. From the heyday of the transatlantic plant exchange in the 1760s with its kalmias and andromedas, mahonias and maples, you can see items such as sophoras and leptospermums marking the progress of plant

When you find orders by the thousand – 2000 two-year-old oaks or 1000 year-old larches, Scotch firs, silver firs, spruce; 2500 beech, birch and mountain ash – you realize there's some serious landscaping going on, bread-and-butter shelter-belt and woodland planting. Orders for 500 Weymouth pine, 250 hornbeam, 100 red cedars and 25 tulip trees show the improver also has quality in mind. Quality invested in trees works both ways: these are not just handsome ornamentals, but harvestable timber too.

Equally functional are occasional orders for box by the yard, probably for the kitchen garden. Utilitarian items like netting, pruning knives, strong nails and vast quantities of mats, for plant protection, appeal to the hands-on gardener. Agriculture is represented by orders for buckwheat, white or Dutch clover, ryegrass, sanfoin, trefoil, and the arcane 'canary' (presumably the grass *Phalaris canariensis*). The kitchen garden is regularly restocked with seed-





Plants in the Wilderness Walk are restricted to those available in England before 1800, such as *Rosa rubiginosa*.

hunting expeditions like Cook's round the globe; in the early 1790s Lord Coventry was ordering Antipodean plants like metrosideros, banksias, New Zealand flax and Botany Bay lily, Botany Bay fig and Botany Bay jasmine. There were mesembryanthemums and proteas from the Cape, camellias and ginkgo from China and, signalling another new phase in plant introductions, orders for China magnolia and new China roses. 'Hortus Croomensis' helps us know how these plants were treated at Croome – how, a generation later, experience had shown they should be cosseted under shelter or in heated houses, or grown outdoors.

One introduction was not to be a problem at Croome. We find Lord Coventry acquiring *Rhododendron ponticum* in 1791, thirty years after it was introduced to England. In more acidic areas this novelty has become a curse, and the National Trust is at pains to remove its blanketing cover from many thousands of acres.

Novelties and Nurseries

We also glimpse aspects of the socio-horticultural history of the nursery trade, and the development of demand and supply. Like 'useful' forest trees, exotics were obtained from nurserymen and plant collectors

either as plants or as seed. Many exotics were complete novelties. Few plants were resilient enough to survive the Atlantic crossing, packed however carefully in boxes of sand or whatever, so seed, or dormant rhizomes or bulbs, were the common currency. It must have been an adventurous gardener who set about growing these unknown plants, and there was great competition to see who succeeded. Landowners like Lord Coventry, who were hungry for novelty, spurred the demand.

It was the heyday of James Gordon's nursery (to be found at 'the last house on the left at Mile-end' in what is now east London). He was the wizard who succeeded in getting tricky new seeds to sprout. When Croome acquired rhododendrons and acacias from Gordon, as evidenced by the bill of 1 March 1760, the gardeners were advised to 'stick yew or holly round them to preserve them from the bleak winds'. The specimens were precious not just for their novelty value, but because they were so hard to propagate. Gordon was quite exceptional in his success in germinating some of the difficult Ericaceae arriving from America. 'What shews his great knowledge and experience in vegetation is his way of raising the finest dusty seeds,' Peter Collinson commented in admiration. Collinson was the unsung Quaker cloth merchant and haberdasher at the hub of the exchange of plants to and fro across the Atlantic, and also with numerous European contacts. 'Before him, I never knew or heard of any man that could raise the dusty seeds of the Kalmias, Rhododendrons, or Azaleas. These charming, hardy shrubs, that excel all others in his care, he furnishes to every curious garden; all the nurserymen and gardeners come to him for them.'

Collinson also recorded that in 1763, 'after more than 20 years' trial', Gordon showed him 'the Loblolly Bay of Carolina coming up from seed in a way not to be expected; this elegant evergreen shrub is next in beauty to the Magnolia's, and his sagacity in raising all sorts of Plants from cuttings, roots and layers surpasses all others by which our gardens are enriched...' In 1766 we find Lord Coventry receiving one or more specimens of loblolly bay (named *Gordonia lasianthos* in Gordon's honour) from nurseryman Clark along with other American plants like andromedas, rhododendrons, swamp pines (*Taxodium distichum*) and honeysuckles.

With the firms of Stavely & Cross, Powell & Eddie, George Ferne or John Williamson you can correlate what's going to Croome with



The shrubby ornamental blackberry *Rubus odoratus*, also known as thimbleberry, was introduced to Britain from eastern North America in 1770, so fits in perfectly with the era when Croome's first shrubberies were being planted.



Opposite The wealth expended on plants by Lord Coventry is commemorated in the extensive archive material held by the Trustees of the Croombe Estate, such as these bills from Messrs Lee & Kennedy.



Watersides attract hosts of marginal weeds and seedling trees that obscure the clean lines and clear reflections you see idealized in paintings. A certain amount of cover is desirable, but vigilant gardening is necessary to keep this habitat groomed to just the right degree.

what's just arrived from North America via Peter Collinson from John Bartram in Philadelphia. Many improving landowners like the Duke of Richmond subscribed directly to Collinson's system of 'five-guinea boxes', but Lord Coventry preferred to get his novelties through a network of nurserymen who themselves paid their five guineas and in return received something of a lucky-dip boxful of seeds. In June 1760 Peter Collinson informed Bartram of 'what Seed will be wanting next fall', and listed the customers, beginning with '2 five-guinea boxes for Gordon who hath sett up a Seed Shop' and including nurserymen Powell & Eddie, Williamson, Ferne, Webb and Bush – all of whom are supplying Croome with seeds. John Bush has a special place in the Croome story, and the two boxes for John Bush were to be specially marked and were to be filled 'with pines, Firrs, Acorns, Beach, Chesnut and all Other Trees...Catalpa & Alders, Junipers, Cedars,

Maples, Birches, Services, Wallnuts, Hickerries, Planes, Padus Cherry, poplars, Tulip Tree, small Magnolia, Mountain Magnolia, &c.' Nurseryman Bush was specializing in good landscape trees.

John Bush wanted seeds of 'the Large forrest tree kind' for 'his friends in Germany' and in 1764 complained that last year's three boxes of seeds 'proved not to Expectation'. Collinson annotated the letter: 'I dont know what to Do with these Germans...Some of the Boxes was open'd, & plundered, by the Spaniard...one of Gordons I saw was served So, possibly these might be so too.' The challenges of importing seeds included weather and enemies. Coventry received American plants and seeds brought from Philadelphia by Captain Bolitho on the *Myrtilla* in 1759. Collinson had been worried about the state of these cargoes: 'of the Living plants Sent I can give but a poor account...many of them was Stumps without Fibers so I had no hopes of them but Live in Expectation they may shoot' (May 1759).

When garden history focuses on plant lists without acknowledging the challenges contemporary gardeners faced in nurturing these unknown precious cargoes, a further dimension – that of the practical gardener – gets lost. Everyone who tries to grow new things knows that gardening is full of surprises, good and bad. The voice of shared experience can be a lingua franca between people of very different background and degree. Capability Brown, in his later years, visited Croome as a friend rather than an employed professional, and it was after visiting the Coventrys in their London home that he was taken ill and died.

Lord Coventry's acknowledgement of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown's achievement was embodied in a monument placed near Croome Lake with an eloquent inscription.

TO THE MEMORY OF
LAUNCELOT BROWN,
WHO, BY THE POWERS OF HIS INIMITABLE AND CREATIVE GENIUS,
FORMED THIS GARDEN SCENE OUT OF
A MORASS.

May it please your Lordship

I have the Honor to acquaint you that I and family are safe arrived at Petersburg after 9 Days passage from England. Her Imperial Majesty received me very graciously & placed me in one of her palaces called Oranienbaum.

I have sent your Lordship a Box of plants marked I C N^o 3 consigned to Dr. Fothergill, by Ship General Conway Capt. Robert Lumley, which I hope will come safe.

next spring when the plants are in bloom I hope we shall find more sorts. it is dangerous in these woods to collect plants there being large Bears & Wolves.

Oranienbaum
Sept^r 20th 1771

The following is the Catalogue

- 1 Vaccinium a plant unknown with a sweet scented flower
- 2 Black Stalk Fern
- 3 Birch
- 4 Pyrola
- 5 Creeping Vaccinium
- 6 Water Plant
- 7 Geranium
- 8 Dwarf Bramble
- 9 Rhododendron 10 plants
- 10 a Fern
- 11 a plant unknown
- 12 a plant unknown
- 13 a plant unknown
- 14 Lilly of the valley minor
- 15 Lilly of the valley major
- 16 or this 6 plants

£5-5-0

I am your Lordships most Hum^{ble} obed^t serv^t

John Bush

please to pay the money to Mr. Mello N^o 36 Finch Church Street
please to direct for me to the care of Messrs.

Wiltven Baxter & Frederick
at
St Petersburg

A Tale of One Bush

John Bush also acquired something of a special relationship with Lord Coventry and became one of those people for whom gardening and horticulture dissolved class barriers. John Bush or Busch (plantsmen and gardeners so often have appropriate names) offers a slice of international garden history, laced with adventure. Born in Hanover, he moved to London in 1744 and ran a successful nursery in Hackney, which he sold when he received an irresistible invitation to Russia in 1771. (Under its new owner, Conrad Loddiges, the nursery became one of the best-known names in the business.)

On his arrival in Russia John Bush sent Lord Coventry – care of Dr John Fothergill, the celebrated Quaker physician and plantsman – a box of woodland plants, including various unknowns, a black-stalked fern, some rhododendrons and vacciniums, and lily of the valley. The accompanying letter acquainted his lordship that Bush and his family were safely arrived at St Petersburg after nine days' passage from England. He hoped the box would come safely, and that when plants were in flower again next spring he might be able to find more sorts: 'it is dangerous in these woods to collect plants there being large bears and wolves.' The box of plants apparently arrived, but not without incident. Annotation on the letter revealed that the ship – the *General Conway* under Captain Robert Lumley – had foundered on the coast of Scotland. The message, however, seems to have got through.

Bush reported: 'Her Imperial Majesty received me very graciously and placed me in one of her palaces called Oranienbaum.' The lady in question was Catherine the Great and Oranienbaum (Lomonosov) was one of the splendid palaces built under Peter the Great. Bush, preferred over other English landscapers because like Catherine he was German-speaking, went on to create the park with picturesque lakes and pools at Gatchina, the palace of Catherine's favourite, Count Gregory Orlov. With the Russian architect Vasily Neyelov he also created the famous park to the south and west of the Ekaterininsky palace at Tsarskoe Selo (renamed Pushkin in the 1930s). They reformed the formal pool into a large lake with promontories and inlets, altered the contours to create other stretches of water, and planted trees. Architectural features included those that were classically inspired (Neyelov's Palladian bridge took after that at Wilton House in

John Bush wrote to Lord Coventry to report his family's safe arrival in St Petersburg. The tone of his letter is as much one of friendship as that of a supplier of plants.

Wiltshire), or built in Turkish or Chinese style. The Ekaterininsky Park is one of the earliest examples of landscaping in the English style in Russia. English influence had been taken east by a German.

There were echoes of Croome and Brown's other landscapes in Catherine's domain. She told Voltaire in 1772 how she scorned straight lines and formality: 'I now love to distraction gardens in the English style...the curving lines, the gentle slopes, the ponds in the form of lakes, the archipelagoes on dry land...in a word, anglomania rules my plantomania.' English landscape parks adorned the 950-piece table service Catherine ordered from Wedgwood and Bentley, and English (and Scottish) architects designed many of the structures in her gardens.

Utility and Beauty

Once the literally ground-breaking restoration scheme currently being implemented by the National Trust is completed and begins to mature, Croome Park will again become more like the scenes painted on Catherine's dinner service. But the days when a landowner or a sovereign could call the tune are long gone. Some 200 years before the M5 was built, the man who commissioned Brown to create the park allowed strategic turnpike roads to pass over his lands and welcomed the better-sprung coaches that enabled both passengers and post to travel between Croome Park and London in under two days. Today the journey can take under two hours. However, George William, sixth Earl of Coventry, would never have countenanced a mere public road to mar the grand design of his Croome parkland. He took pains to shield the surroundings of Croome Court from such troublesome thoroughfares and he rerouted the public road from Pershore to the Severn so that it ran to the north side of Croome church, further from the Court. Later he improved the quality of other access routes around the village of Severn Stoke. Long after his day, railway technology replaced the Severn and its canal network as the main freight route.

Today, as vapour trails lace the sky and motorway white noise clouds the air, the sort of time capsule offered by spaces like Croome Park becomes increasingly precious. All the more important that they are restored to life and revitalized with the promise of a living future. They are our national treasure. They belong to our National Trust. This land is our land.

Capability Brown resited the Church of St Mary Magdalene on the brow of a hill to the north of Croome Court. It is now maintained by the Churches Conservation Trust, but it still serves as an eyecatcher in the landscape.



