

WADHURST HISTORY SOCIETY.

Wednesday 10th July 2013.

“The Capable Mr Brown” a talk by Russell Bowes, about Lancelot Capability Brown.

Jane Austen’s familiar face appeared as the first slide of the fascinating talk given to us this week by Russell Bowes, garden history lecturer. She was seven years old when Mr Brown died, but Russell was illustrating the fact that Capability Brown was designing gardens for the future, and that Jane Austen had a sharp eye for the nuances of garden design as an indicator of status and also of modernity or conservatism. Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s garden at Rosings Park in Kent being described as old fashioned, with formality and straight lines, whereas Pemberley, (Fitzwilliam D’Arcy’s house) which may well have been modelled on Chatsworth House (one of Lancelot Capability Brown’s designs) with sweeping views, serpentine lake and clumps of fine trees, showing an openness to new ideas and fashions.

These designs were for posterity, for future generations to enjoy. There was nothing instant about them. Some took many years to complete, and involved the removal of vast quantities of earth which was then used to construct hills and banks. Whole villages could be removed to another location. Water courses were dammed, and diverted. Nathaniel Dance’s portrait of Capability Brown hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in London. He appears in it to be observing the observer, with a slightly quizzical tilt to his head. Even in his own time he was not universally praised, and his star has waxed and waned with different views of his work, ranging from Sir Roy Strong’s condemnation (and refusal to include him in a major exhibition at the V&A because “his designs modulated ground, trees and water - he is not a gardener“ Others saw him as a genius who, with William Kent, created the classical ‘English’ style of natural landscape.



Lancelot (Capability) Brown was born in 1716. His birth was registered at his baptism on 30th August that year. He was born the fifth child of a farmer (or farm labourer) and a chambermaid. She worked at a nearby grand house, Kirkharle House, for Sir William Lambton Loraine, who had studied the science of landscape architecture and botany. Several particular factors indicate that he may have been the father of Lancelot Capability Brown. The name Lancelot was strangely aristocratic for a servant’s child, he was kept at full-time school until the age of 15, he worked in the kitchen garden of the estate, and was sent away to Buckinghamshire, possibly when he started to resemble his father. This is all conjecture.

The creation of gardens was considered to be a gentlemanly pursuit, and in the English Age of Enlightenment the young scions of aristocratic families were expected to tour Europe with their tutors and companions, visiting the great centres of culture in France and Italy. These Grand Tours led to changes in fashions in many aspects of life, and in particular to the grounds of the great estates. Souvenir paintings of the so-called Golden Age of classical civilisation, with ancient Grecian temples, lakes, and distant views of buildings seen over broad bodies of reflective water became the template for grand gardens. No longer the domination of nature by man, but an idealised version of nature, still artificial, but made to look as if it had occurred without human intervention.

Through introductions made by his first employer Sir William, and then Lord Cobham whose grounds at Stowe he worked on from 1741, Lancelot Capability Brown became acquainted with all the aristocrats who spent part of their year in London, and part on their country estates. At Stowe Lancelot Capability Brown was given a substantial five-storey tall gate-house on the Oxford road – one of the Boycott Pavilions. They had a staff of 35 to 40, and he had a ‘can-do’ approach to any gardening problems. This included the invention of a clever tree lifting cart, which could lever a forty foot tall tree out of the ground for transplanting with plenty of rootball left intact, very handy for the creation of instant landscape if carried out in the autumn.

In 1742, Capability Brown met Bridget Wayet, the daughter of a Lincolnshire solicitor. A love-match led to their marriage in Stowe Church in 1744. This is still to be found hidden in the grounds of Stowe, as it could not be moved when the rest of the village was put ‘outside the pale’ in the redesigned landscape.

Since Capability Brown was often ‘lent’ to friends of Lord Cobham, eventually in 1749 he decided to go freelance, and set up home and practice in Hammersmith, London. One of his neighbours was gentleman builder Henry Holland. They collaborated on many projects and in 1773 Capability Brown’s daughter Bridget married Henry Holland junior. Capability Brown’s work thrived and included a project for the actor-manager David Garrick. As owner of Hampton House he wanted to build a temple to Shakespeare, but the land for this was beyond a public highway. Capability Brown’s simple but brilliant design had a tunnel built, which was embellished as a grotto with ammonites, shells and crystals. In 1764, Syon House Garden was admired by King George, and Capability Brown was requested to work for the Royal gardens; this commission was not particularly welcome as he had very little time to spare, and so not much was actually changed, with the exception of the newly imported Black Hamburg Grape which was planted at Hampton Court. This amazing plant still produces some 8,000 pounds of fruit every year.

In 1767, Bridget and Lancelot bought a small manor at Fenstanton, and Capability Brown was nominated as Lord Lieutenant of Huntingdonshire. Their marriage was by all accounts a happy one, and they had some ten children, five of whom survived. He was an amazingly prolific designer, and included a number of interiors in his portfolio. One was a project for Lord Clive of India, owner of Claremont House, who had brought back from India a superb carpet some 67 feet long and 14 feet wide. In order to lay this massive piece Capability Brown suggested that all

intervening walls and doors on the ground floor of the house should be knocked through. This produced a three-storey high hall, which is still called the 'Indian Carpet Room'

Capability Brown's last commission was at Sheffield Park in Sussex. By now exotic colour was in



fashion, and Capability Brown was obliged to include brightly coloured trees, and flowers brought back from the colonies, such as geraniums and fuchsias. Capability Brown's solution was to hide the bright flowers in amongst the trees - in much the same way as he had banished the kitchen garden further and further afield in his early days.

Capability Brown died in 1783, after dining with Lord Coventry in London. He

was a widely admired and wealthy designer, he had enjoyed the company of all the greatest aristocrats of his period, he had had a long and happy marriage with many children. He was credited with changing the face of England, and his obituary described him as a fine genius.

As Russell Bowes had hoped, this talk put human flesh and bones on a man of whom we have all heard, and whose gardens we have almost certainly visited, and it brought alive a fascinating period of history.