



# Capability Brown at Blenheim Palace



Aerial view of Blenheim Palace, the south lawn and park © Blenheim Palace

At Blenheim Capability Brown created a spectacular, tree-fringed lake as the setting for one of England's grandest houses, for the 4th Duke of Marlborough.

Queen Anne had given the estate to John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough, following his victory at the Battle of Blenheim in 1704. In around 1763 Brown was called in to complete and modernise the landscaping around Blenheim Palace, which then centred on an existing lake, Grand Bridge and a long, straight avenue. Over the next 10 years Brown built two dams and created a huge 40-acre lake. He planted thick belts of trees around the park boundary, designed new drives and remodelled the entrance to the north of Blenheim Palace.

In a letter dated 29 June 1763, the duke made it clear that Brown was to make Blenheim his priority, although he had also been making plans for the duke's estate at Langley in Buckinghamshire. Spyers carried out the survey at Blenheim in that year, assisted by a local lad, James Stuckly. His fee was £24 (£41,720 in 2015).

We know that Brown was at Blenheim at least twice in 1765, based on letters he sent that year. He seems to have placed great confidence in foreman Benjamin Read, who also worked for him at Croome.

Blenheim Palace: [www.blenheimpalace.com](http://www.blenheimpalace.com)

Particular thanks to Karen Wiseman at Blenheim Palace

For more information about Brown and his work go to [capabilitybrown.org/research](http://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](http://capabilitybrown.org/research)

Portrait of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, c.1770-75, by Richard Cosway (1742/1821)/Private Collection/Bridgeman Images.



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## Lake and Cascades

At Blenheim, Brown wanted to create a new lake to the west of the Grand Bridge, to link underneath with the existing Duchess' lake in the east. The idea of two lakes, joined by a canal, had already been suggested in the early 1700s, when architect Sir John Vanbrugh and gardener Henry Wise were at Blenheim.

At that time, the 1st Duchess of Marlborough didn't like Vanbrugh's plan for "a great sea round the house". She was worried that "beautiful green meadows ... will be all over in spots of dirty stinking water." Instead, a shallow lake and cascade were formed, to give a setting to the new bridge.

Brown enlarged the Duchess' lake up to Vanbrugh's Grand Bridge (now listed Grade I) and created Elizabeth Island (though this feature was not on his plan). At the Woodstock end of the Duchess' lake he extended the water to include the Queen Pool, as it was then called. Now the whole lake to the east of the bridge is known as the Queen Pool.

In the west, foreman Benjamin Read took charge of the men building the Blenheim Dam (1765-1770), where the River Glyme turned south. This was a huge engineering project, with underground run-offs and one overground run-off, the Cascades. This new lake was lined with layers of puddled clay (a mixture of sand, clay and water) and took about a year to fill with water.



The Lake and Grand Bridge © VisitEngland and Blenheim Palace



The cascade © Blenheim Palace

Below the Cascades Brown widened, deepened and altered the course of the river. About half a mile downstream he built the Bladon Dam, raising 900 metres of the river bank to create the lake and cascade near Lince Lodge.

The 9th Duke of Marlborough later described Brown's achievement: "The Lake was made by a consummate Artist. The contours are good, the ground has been made to undulate; a convex bank on one side finds its vis-à-vis with a concave bank on the other side. All this done with the skill of the Romantic period and on a scale bigger than the Basin des Suisses."





Ancient cedars by the lake © Blenheim Palace

### Trees at Blenheim

Brown understood the importance of trees in creating the perfect view for visitors driving or riding in the park. They both hid and revealed features – making people want to explore further. At Blenheim he planted four stands of beech trees on either side of the Grand Bridge, hiding the points where it sloped into the ground. He used cedar, acacia, poplar, chestnut and beech in the area around the Cascades.

The 3rd Duke of Marlborough, who died in 1758, had begun planting belts of trees around the edge of the estate. Brown continued this process, creating a double row of trees around the park, both for privacy and to give the illusion of forest beyond the walls. An early guidebook commented on all the different colours produced by his use of evergreen and deciduous shrubs here.

Brown also made use of a variety of trees planted in clumps or as individual specimens. He mixed trees of differing heights to make a canopy. In other places he made an impact by grouping a large number of beeches, for example, in a belt around the park.

### Drives into the park

Brown designed two different drives into Blenheim park. The entrance from Woodstock via the Hensington Gate is spectacular, as the magnificent Baroque-style house, lake and bridge come into view across the valley. The southern approach is longer and more picturesque, cleverly using changes in the level of the land, so that the water can be glimpsed through the trees. William Fordyce Mavor wrote about this drive, with its constantly changing views, in a late 18th-century guidebook: “The water, the Palace, the Gardens, the Great Bridge, the Pillar, Woodstock, and other near and remote objects, open and shut upon the eye like enchantment”.

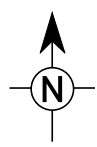
### South Lawn and ha-has

Brown removed what remained of the formal gardens that had been laid out by Henry Wise for the 1st Duke of Marlborough, creating the South Lawn at Blenheim. A view of the South Lawn by artist and engraver William Radclyffe (1783-1855) shows smooth lawns running all the way up to the house and a gravel path.

At the end of the South Lawn Brown built a ha-ha (sunken wall and ditch) to keep the livestock away from the house. The ha-ha ran from the kitchen gardens as far as the Cascades and opened up wide-ranging views across to Bladon village and St Martin’s church. A second ha-ha ran from the East Gate (now Snake Gate) on the corner of East Courtyard round to the kitchen gardens.

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## Capability Brown features

- 1 Lakes
- 2 Lawns south of the Palace
- 3 Ha-ha
- 4 Cascade
- 5 Parkland with clumps of trees
- 6 Perimeter belts
- 7 High Park Lodge
- 8 Garden temples
- ★ Eye-catcher
- ↑ Viewpoint
- ~ Ha-ha
- 🌲 Specimen trees
- 🌳 Woodland or copse
- 🌳 Parkland trees
- 🌿 Shrubbery

- 📍 Visitor Centre
- ☕ Refreshments
- 🚻 Toilets
- P Parking
- ♿ Disabled Parking

500 yards  
500 metres



### Great Court and park buildings

Another striking feature of Brown's work was his redesign of the Great Court to the north of Blenheim Palace. He removed the formal arrangement of stone terraces, cobbles and gravel, and replaced this with an oval lawn surrounded by a sweeping gravel carriage drive and a further lawn beyond.

In the park, Brown proposed improvements or additions to the buildings. His designs included a Bathing Place at Rosamund's Well (a spring with stone pool), a Granary at Park Farm, and the remodelling of Woodstock town walls and Hensington Gates in the Gothic style. However, the only proposal the Duke implemented was one to 'Gothicise' High Lodge, which overlooks the palace to the north-east, giving it a central three-storey tower and battlements.



Aerial view of Blenheim Palace, park and gardens © Blenheim Palace

### Biodiversity at Blenheim

At Blenheim the parkland supports a variety of habitats including ancient woodland, replanted ancient woodland, lowland calcareous grassland, coastal floodplain grazing marsh, deciduous woodland, mixed coniferous woodland, traditional orchards and reedbeds around the lakes which provide habitats for a variety of insects, butterflies and moths as well as otter and water vole. Blenheim Park is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), and contains one of the finest areas of ancient oak-dominated pasture woodland in the country. One of its impressive oak specimens has been dated to 1,046 years old.

### Restoration at Blenheim

The 9th Duke of Marlborough (1871-1934) played a major role in restoring the landscape at Blenheim to its former glory. The lake on the Woodstock side of the bridge had silted up and had to be dredged. He also replanted the avenue of trees running north from the Column of Victory. To the south of the house Brown's lawn and ha-ha remain as he created them.

One major change is that the duke rebuilt the Great Court in the early 1900s to Vanbrugh's formal design, removing Brown's lawn. The duke planted large numbers of new trees at the estate, using them to create and frame views, as Brown did, even though not always where Brown had put them.



A classical building in the park © Blenheim Palace

### World Heritage Site

Blenheim Palace remains the home of the Spencer-Churchill family. The 12th Duke of Marlborough succeeded to the title in 2014.

Blenheim became a World Heritage Site in 1987, in recognition of the quality of the architecture by John Vanbrugh and Nicholas Hawksmoor and Brown's landscaping. The house and the 2,000 acres of parkland and gardens are all listed Grade I.

Blenheim is one of the best examples of Brown's skill and vision in creating a seemingly natural and sublimely beautiful landscape.