

Capability Brown at Coombe Abbey Park



In 1771 the 6th Baron Craven commissioned Capability Brown to modernise the landscape around the former Cistercian monastery at Coombe Abbey.

Brown swept away the elaborate Elizabethan gardens and landscaped the park to create a serpentine lake, sweeping views and extensive new planting. Working with architect Henry Holland Junior, his son-in-law, Brown also designed several buildings, including a boathouse, menagerie and lodge gates.

In a letter, probably around August 1770, Lord Craven wrote to Brown about Coombe (also spelt Combe): "I desire you to exert yr. utmost abilities to improve the place and shall leave everything else to you. I hope you will not leave Coombe till you have made a plan and estimate and that you will get the man you mentioned to me, and begin directly."

Work had begun at Coombe by September 1771. Brown recorded payments of £7,150 (more than £11.3 million in 2015) between then and May 1774. He was also working for Lord Craven at Benham Valence during the mid 1770s, and a payment in January 1776 included landscaping work done at both estates.

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.

Portrait of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, c.1770-75, by Richard Cosway

[17421821]/Private Collection/
Bridgeman Images.



Coombe Pool

Brown was an expert at making serpentine lakes that looked like natural rivers.

At Coombe Abbey the Smite Brook flows from the north east to the south west through a shallow valley, north and west of the house. Brown dammed the brook to create the main lake, Coombe Pool, and the smaller Top Pool. This impressive sheet of water is 1.5 miles long, covers 90 acres and forms an L shape or 'dog-leg' that makes it appear endless – an effect Brown often achieved with his sinuous water features.

Brown's extensive planting, including many deciduous trees, created a belt of woodland stretching from Little Wrautam along the north and west sides of Coombe Pool and along the trees in the park, but he also kept some of the trees from the existing formal avenues as part of his new scheme.

In the pleasure grounds Brown laid lawns and planted single trees around the house, replacing the walled garden, parterre (flower beds) and other formal features shown in early 18th-century illustrations of Coombe.



Boathouse and menagerie

Brown is thought to have designed up to seven buildings at Coombe Abbey, working with Henry Holland Junior. The boathouse at Coombe lies on the south side of the lake. Built of red brick, this single-storey building is shown on a plan of 1778. The side facing the water is open ended, with an entrance door opposite.



In contrast to his Gothic-style menagerie at Blenheim, the one Brown designed for Coombe is plain and classical. The hexagonal tower with domed roof was inspired by King Louis XIV's Royal Menagerie at the Palace of Versailles. Located on a high point at the west end of the park, the menagerie was part of a group of farm buildings and also acted as an eye-catcher in long views across the lake.

Brown also designed kennels in the Gothic style, west of the south drive to the house. These were pulled down in the late 19th century. He may also have carried out minor works to the interior of the house, including the insertion of new chimney pieces in several rooms.



Duck decoy

Top Pool

Climbing forest

Gardens and arboretum

Go Ape

Wildflower meadow

Play area

Visitor Centre

Coombe Abbey Hotel

Entrance

Conservation area

Bird hide

The Heronry

Heron standing ground

Old Deer Park
Grazing livestock

Anglers' entrance

Coombe Pool Fishery

to Brinklow

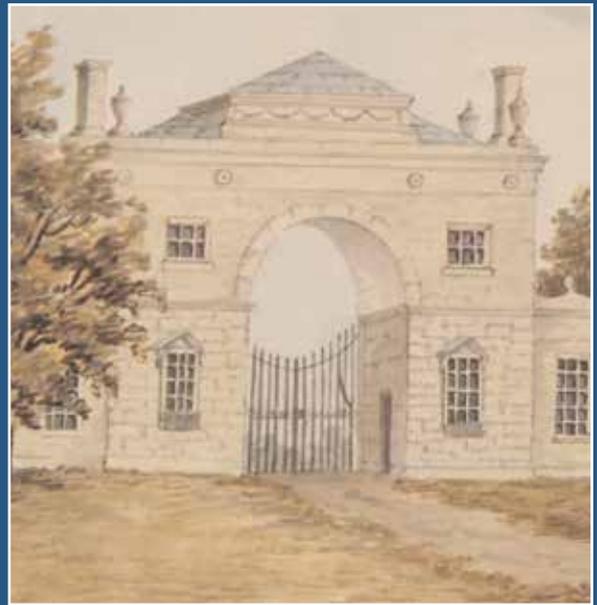
to Coventry

Lodges and drives

As part of his scheme Brown created a circuit of drives through the park so that visitors could enjoy the views he had designed around the lake and buildings. He remodelled the approach to the house, with a new drive from the south across the lawns that ended at a carriage circle – a circular area of grass within the courtyard.

It is thought that Henry Holland Junior designed the West Lodge, which lies half a mile south-west of the house. Built of stone, with classical ornaments, it has an arched entrance with single-storey wings on either side. Either Brown or Holland designed the Gothic-style East Lodge south-east of the house.

Brown also built the west drive, partly following the route of the public road from Brinklow to Coventry, which had been diverted to the south in around 1775.



Biodiversity at Coombe

At Coombe, the parkland features support a variety of habitats including wood pasture and parkland, ancient woodland, deciduous woodland, good quality semi-improved grazing marsh and habitats associated with the lake.

Within the site is Coombe Pool Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The 36 hectare pool created by Brown, has supported a heronry for 200 years on a small island, and is one of the most important ornithological sites in Warwickshire, due to its herons, overwintering fowl and other breeding birds including tufted duck, shoveler (a county rarity), water rail and kingfisher.



Coombe Abbey Park and Abbey today

During the 19th century the 2nd Earl Craven enlarged the house and commissioned landscape architect William Andrews Nesfield to design formal gardens. The 5th Earl Craven sold Coombe Abbey and 50 hectares (120 acres) of land in 1923. In 1964 Coventry City Council bought the estate.

In the early 1990s Coombe Abbey Park Ltd was set up to renovate the Abbey buildings and turn them into a luxury hotel. The Council was able to acquire and restore the Old Deer Park, which had been privately owned for most of the 20th century, as a country park.

In recent years, works to restore the boathouse (pictured) and returning the landscape to Brown's vision has taken place. This has involved renewing his planting in the park and opening up sightlines that showcase the lake and views across the estate as he intended.

