

Chatsworth

Bakewell, Derbyshire, UK

Photographs by Alan Ward 1997

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

Layers of design at Chatsworth make this landscape a composite of different eras, with visible traces of earlier forms still visible after four hundred years of evolution and change. Designs were installed, removed, modified and enlarged, which is characteristic of most of England's significant parks and gardens; the pure example is rare. There has been a continuity of ownership of this site in Derbyshire by the successive Dukes of Devonshire, however their preferences and tastes evolved, along with changing ways of life, as well as the underlying economics of the countryside that led to altering the landscape. There were three significant periods of landscape change, each by a prominent designer, that are interwoven at Chatsworth, and are now experienced as a harmonious composition on the land.

The first significant landscape design was in the 1690s by George London, of the firm London and Wise, who were prominent designers, horticulturists, and suppliers of plants in a burgeoning landscape industry in England at that time. London's design established a Renaissance Garden of parterres, along with allées and grids of trees, that extended the classical symmetry of the house to the site. The house is organized around a series of courtyards, that are aligned in a north to south direction in a valley on the east bank of the River Derwent. This geometric order of the north to south axis, parallel to the river, was further extended to the landscape by laying a grid on the land around the house to organize all of the site improvements.¹ Elements of this geometric order remain visible today near the house with the South Lawn and West Terrace (10-14). The Cascade, completed in 1696, is to the east on higher ground with water that flows from a small temple-like structure down a series of terraces, also aligned on the grid, along an east to west axis (17-20). The south axis has a

1. This geometric order is diagrammed in *Architecture and Landscape: The Design Experiment of Great European Gardens and Landscapes* by Clemens Steenbergen

Canal over 280 meters long, that required levelling a hill to open up views down the river valley (15-16). This initial gridded ordering system for the site remained influential for the alignment of future garden elements added near the house, however, the second prominent landscape designer to work at Chatsworth, Lancelot Brown in the 1760s, had a larger scale vision for the site beyond the strict layout of the Renaissance Garden.

Lancelot 'Capability' Brown transformed the surrounding land in the river valley into a park, that evokes images of an idealized English countryside, while retaining some of the key elements of the earlier Renaissance Garden (1-3, 41-56). Beyond the immediate environs of the house, the setting was a rather barren, unattractive landscape. He changed the main entry drive from the east side of the valley to the west side, adding a new curving road, which traverses a gently undulating landscape along the river (1). A beautiful triple-arched bridge, designed by James Paine, was set at an angle to view the house on the approach over the widened river (4).

Brown's planting strategies at Chatsworth over large expanses of modified terrain create beautiful parkland, featuring groves of trees, smaller clumps of several trees, as well as single trees - all composed to create variety and depth in space (41-56). He typically avoided unusual and exotic species,² instead aiming to make a landscape emblematic of the English countryside with beech, oak, elm, ash and lime trees, however, in a few prominent locations Brown selected cedar of Lebanon, or other evergreens, as a distinctive focal point in the planting design. The splendid simplicity and clarity of this parkland landscape was enhanced by the removal of fences, walls and

2. See John Phibbs, *Capability Brown: Designing the English Landscape* for more on Brown's planting design

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buildings. Where there were once small feudal field patterns, flowing lawns dramatically change the scale. Fortunately, Brown kept the form of the parterres on the land adjacent to the house, but simplified these flat planes into rectangular lawns, including the elongated South Lawn, which remains today (10-14). He removed the parterres and walls that stepped up the slopes to the east, and made simpler, rolling topography, called the Salisbury Lawns (21-22). This also made the existing Cascade more visually prominent by simplifying the context around this terraced water feature (17-19). While often criticized for such disruptions, these were masterful refinements by Brown that enhanced and incorporated the best and most captivating elements from the past, while adding the larger scale of a park landscape to the spaces beyond the house.

Brown's expansive design for the Chatsworth landscape encompassed over 400 hectares, well beyond the environs of the house, so what changed in England to influence this shift in landscape design? Agriculture, still at the core of the British economy, underwent significant modernization in the eighteenth century. A scientific approach was applied in which selective breeding yielded more meat, wool, and milk. The three-field system where farmers had three separate plots near villages was changed with the enclosure of land, so that each farmer had his own land in one place. Landowners, who since the Middle Ages had farmed their land, increasingly began to collect rents from their tenants. The resulting higher yields and greater income from agricultural land at mid-century was an incentive for the owners of estates to improve their properties with additional planting, reclaiming land with drainage schemes, and enclosing larger tracts,³ all of which coincided with Lancelot Brown's larger scale vision of the landscape garden.

3. Mark Giroud, *Life in the Country House*

4. Dan Bogart, *The Turnpike Roads of England and Wales*

5. Charles Quest-Ritson, *The English Garden: A Social History*

Another parallel improvement in transportation at that time was an expanded network of turnpike roads that created faster and more accessible routes to country houses. In the early eighteenth century, for example, it took three days from London to Bakewell in northwestern England, and ten days to Edinburgh by the speediest coach service. By the mid-eighteenth century, increasing wealth in local agricultural communities led to bonds issued for new roads financed by tolls to transport higher agricultural yields to market, connecting London and its environs, to the countryside and major provincial centers.⁴

In Brown's design vision there is an inherent beauty in a productive pastoral landscape, that included extensive areas of turf supporting grazing, along with tree planting and reforestation. In the mid-eighteenth century, the value of land for grazing nearly equaled the value of cultivated land, so the aesthetic vision of a pastoral landscape with sheep could also produce income.⁵ Reforestation had commercial advantages as well, because timber for shipbuilding was required from the Baltic countries since the late seventeenth century. Tree plantations were part of Brown's strategy to define and control sightlines within the property, but also created habitat for game to support an increased demand for hunting with new lighter firearms used on country estates. The design overlay for Chatsworth thus had economic incentives, as well as responding to changing ways of life in country houses.⁶

The next layer of design added to Chatsworth is in the nineteenth century. Jeffrey Wyatt was the architect for the large north wing added to the house and a new façade on the east side, both built during the 1820s (5,22). Wyatt

6. Brown's landscapes were designed for carriage riding. Prior to the 18th century, carriage riding was limited. By the 1750s, the widespread use of leaf springs increased comfort; travel by carriage became a status symbol.

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also laid out the impressive 570-meter long Broad Walk, extending north to south along the east side of the house, and along his new facade, making it the most gracious and prominent path in the garden (5-8).

While the Broad Walk was an important new addition to the site, the most significant modifications to the landscape and grounds in the nineteenth century were designed by James Paxton. Paxton did not significantly modify the layout of the site, like his predecessors, however he embraced the new technologies of the time to enhance the Chatsworth landscape, including the Emperor Fountain added to the Canal, with an eighty-meter-high jet, that is a gravity-fed fountain feature (14-15). He designed ponds amidst a setting of large, rough-cut stones and water to make a natural-appearing picturesque landscape (33-35). Perhaps his most important contribution was making Chatsworth a focus for botanical research, with a series of glasshouses for plants. The huge Great Conservatory, covering almost three thousand square meters, was designed by Paxton, assisted by architect Decimus Burton. This was ten years before Paxton's Crystal Palace in London would captivate the world. Of Paxton's glasshouses, only the Conservatory Wall and Vinery remain (23-25). The Great Conservatory was demolished in 1920, but the legacy of botanical research continues with a modern greenhouse, completed in 1970 (26).⁷

Chatsworth is distinctive with three significant periods of landscape design endeavors, that are still visible to over 400,000 visitors a year. The views in the photographs were chosen to illustrate this interaction between varying ideas about making meaningful designed landscapes in each era. The Canal, Emperor Fountain, and Cascade - experienced within the context of Lancelot

7. The Duchess of Devonshire, *The Estate: A View of Chatsworth*

Brown's designed English countryside, is an impressive juxtaposition of almost four centuries of landscape design.

The most elusive part of this design to photograph is Brown's expansive vision and simplified composition, that expresses England's intrinsic relationship to the land, recalling an agrarian and pastoral ideal of the past. Brown's landscapes do not appear as designed overlays superimposed on the site, but rather, as almost an extension of the surroundings, expressing the vernacular beauty of the English landscape. He relied less on classical garden architecture than in earlier periods, aiming for broader landscape gestures with modifications to the river, flowing topography, and compositional groupings of trees - while working at the vast scale of a river valley at Chatsworth.

There are a number of views of trees within flowing lawns, because of the significance of this design approach in Lancelot Brown's palette of landscape elements, even if many of these trees were planted well after his additions to Chatsworth; they still reflect the spirit of his design. The photographs conclude with a series of views of individual trees at the bottom of the valley along the river (48-56). Each tree seems to have its own identity and personality in this open landscape of fields and meadows, which are inherently appealing and calming to the senses. I am reminded of Philip Marsden in his book recounting his walks across Cornwall, that captures the spirit of this landscape, when he says "But sitting under a tree by a stream, surrounded by hills, offers not just relief but the chance for those fleeting moments of transcendence that sustain all creeds."⁸

8. Philip Marsden, *Rising Ground: A Search for Spirit of Place*

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Notes

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