

# Capability Brown at Sherborne Castle



Capability Brown's lake © Sherborne Castle Estates

From 1753 Capability Brown landscaped the grounds at Sherborne in two phases, creating the beautiful lake that dominates the park and later remodelling the pleasure grounds.

Edward Digby lived at Coleshill Hall in Warwickshire, and may have seen the landscapes that Brown was creating at Newnham Paddox and Packington Hall nearby. In 1753 Edward inherited the estate at Sherborne in Dorset from his grandfather, and became the 6th Lord Digby. Soon after he called in Brown to modernise the formal layout of canals and groves in the gardens, which had been designed by his uncle, Robert Digby in the 1720s.

Lord Digby sent Brown a plan of the park to use when drawing up his design for the new lake at Sherborne. His agent, William Burnett, kept track of what was being spent at the estate in a series of account books. These records help to give a picture of Brown's work at Sherborne.

Sherborne Castle: [www.sherbornecastle.com](http://www.sherbornecastle.com)

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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.



LOTTERY FUNDED

### Creating the lake

Brown created the 50-acre lake at Sherborne by damming the River Yeo, which flows from east to west through the valley to the north of the castle. There is a design for the lake showing two islands linked by bridges, but this scheme wasn't used. It is unsigned and undated but may be Brown's early ideas for Sherborne.

To form the lake Brown flooded parts of the early 18th-century garden, which had included groves of horse chestnuts and a bowling green. Burnett's account book records that the work included "Cutting down the Trees in the Grove" and lists a cost of £3 and 6 shillings (nearly £6,000 in 2015) for "Pulling down the Walls in the Canals". This is a reference to the formal water features in the valley that were part of the earlier gardens.

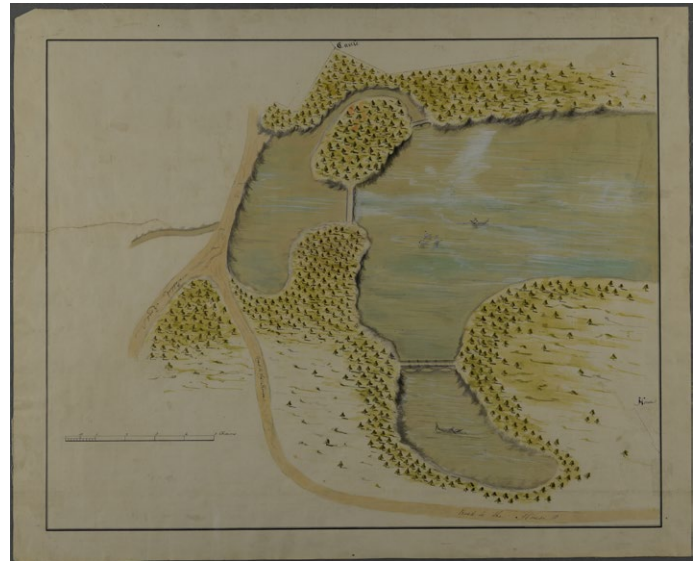
Where the valley narrows on the northern side of the outflow from the lake, Brown built a spectacular rocky cascade. The northern bank of the lake was planted with mature cedars and other specimen trees. On the south-facing bank some of the terraces from the old formal gardens were kept.



The cascade at Sherborne Castle © Sherborne Castle Estates

By the time it was completed in 1755, Brown's huge piece of water had cost almost £550 (about £970,000 in 2015). Lord Digby bought 210 brace of tench for his new lake and 9 wild ducks, as well as a boat. He was so pleased with the project that he gave Brown a bonus of £10 guineas (about £18,500 in 2015).

Sadly, creating the lake at Sherborne claimed the lives of "two men that was drowned". The final cost included burial expenses and providing financial support to their families.



An early proposal for a Lake at Sherborne Castle © Sherborne Castle Estates

The lake provided a magnificent focal point for views across the estate and for those enjoying walks or rides in the park and pleasure grounds. In the late 1760s a bridge was built across the head of the lake, providing a spectacular route for carriages.

One of the stopping points on the route around the lake was Raleigh's Seat, the viewing spot that former owner Sir Walter Raleigh had built against the park wall in the north-east.



Bridge across the lake © Sherborne Castle Estates



The mock-ruined tower built by Daniel Penny © Sherborne Castle Estates

## Sherborne Old Castle

Improvements were also made to the remains of the medieval Sherborne Old Castle, which became a major feature in views northwards across the new lake from the current house. To make the site look more picturesque, local builder Daniel Penny built a mock ruined tower there in 1755. A crenellated wall was put up along the top of the moat between the park and the ruins. Yews and specimen cedar trees were also planted to improve the scene.

In around 1790 another drive was created from the park into the ruins across the new Earl Henry's Bridge, so that visitors could enjoy views over the lake and the deer park. The wrought-iron Clairvoire (see-through) gates were also added on the north side of the water.

## Remodelling the pleasure grounds

Edward died in 1757, and Sherborne passed to his brother Henry, 7th Lord Digby, who continued to improve the estate. In 1776 Brown was called in to remodel the gardens around the house and landscape the lake. Now at the height of his career, Brown's fee for this second phase of work was £1,100 (more than £1.6 million in 2015).

The walled Parlour Garden to the east side of the house was removed so that Brown could lay the East Lawn, giving uninterrupted views out into the deer park. He also levelled terraces to create the North Lawn and built a ha-ha (sunken wall and ditch) around the East Lawn to keep animals out.



The Clairvoire gates © Sherborne Castle Estates



East Lawn and ha-ha © Sherborne Castle Estates

## The Orangery

Architect Henry Holland Junior, who was Brown's son-in-law, is thought to have designed the Orangery, which stands north-west of the house. Laying out the garden in this area was also part of Brown's contract, which called for "trees, shrubs and flowers" to be planted there.

Holland may also have built or rebuilt Pope's Seat, a stone alcove just north of the Cascade, which was named after poet Alexander Pope, who visited Sherborne in the 1720s. As part of the remodelling of the service area, Brown built a tunnel underneath Castle Yard, to give staff access to the outbuildings.

# Capability Brown at Sherborne Castle



## Capability Brown features

- 1 The Cedars
- 2 The Folly
- 3 Boat Shaped Bed
- 4 Wall and tunnel
- 5 The Orangery
- 6 The Cascade
- 7 The Lake
- ★ Eye-catcher
- ↑ Viewpoint
- ⎓ Ha-ha
- 🌲 Specimen trees
- 🌳 Woodland or copse
- 🌳 Parkland trees
- 🌱 Shrubbery

- i** Visitor Centre
- ☕ Refreshments
- 🚻 Toilets
- P** Parking

100 yards  
100 metres



Aerial view of Sherborne Castle and lake © Sherborne Castle Estates

### Maintaining the park

In the mid-19th century owner George Wingfield Digby was faced with the problem of clearing the lake of silt, weeds and water lilies. In 1857 he employed the specialist firm of Charles Turner to dredge the lake. To keep the water clear he also bought a steam weeding machine, which was used regularly and finally sold off for scrap during the Second World War.

In 1974 the lake had to be dredged again, to remove weeds and increase the depth of the water. By this time the planting on the far side of the lake had also become very overgrown, hiding much of the 18th-century planting. This has since been cleared, allowing visitors to access the Dry Grounds walk, to the east of the castle ruins.

Brown must have suggested planting his signature Cedars of Lebanon on the far side of the Lake and along the Dry Grounds Walk, for in 1769 Lord Digby purchased twenty cedars from a nursery in Dorchester.

### Biodiversity at Sherborne Castle

At Sherborne Castle the parkland supports a variety of habitats including wood pasture and parkland, ancient woodland, deciduous woodland, broadleaved and conifer woodland, and wetland habitats associated with the large lake.

### Sherborne today

The Wingfield Digby family continue to live at Sherborne. The Grade I-listed house, park and gardens are open to the public, while English Heritage now manages the ruins of Sherborne Old Castle.

Sherborne remains an outstanding example of an unaltered Capability Brown landscape. The family and the Head Gardener work to maintain Brown's vision, regularly replanting shrubs, trees and herbaceous borders at the estate.



Cedars at Sherborne © Sherborne Castle Estates