**‘Situation fine and romantic’**

Capability Brown at Appuldurcombe

An anonymous, late Georgian memorandum is informative:

*... ‘Appuldurcombe House a very good mansion, convenient and well arranged. House in excellent condition. Paintings very superior by the first masters. Marbles & Gems of the most rare & costly character. The Grecian marbles scarce to be equalled in the Kingdom. The Park is most beautiful land of superior quality well wooded. Timber very fine about 1000 deer in the Park. Garden not very good. Small Hot house. Lawn in front of the house, laid out under the direction of the late Lord Y very well done shows great taste. The house in a valey(sic) surrounded by very high downs. Situation fine & romantic. Fine fountain of water in front of the house. Particulars of a beech tree in Appul Park supposed to be the largest in the Isle of White (sic). The beech with a seat in front of it standing a little distance south west of the Mansion House. Measured Oct 11 1828 38 ft circumference Height 71 ft Spread 44 ft from the centre 7 covers 1/8 of an acre.’[[1]](#endnote-1)*

Over four decades earlier, Sir Richard Worsley, seventh Baronet, had penned a description of Appuldurcombe, its prime location uppermost in his mind offering extensive views with historic naval connections.[[2]](#endnote-2) Taking up the position as Comptroller of the Board of Green Cloth in George III’s Royal Household (1778-1779) he came into closer contact with the royal gardener. It would have been relatively convenient for Brown, directing works for Robert Drummond at Cadland House, Hampshire and Lord Bute at Highcliffe, Dorset, to fit in a short ferry trip across the Solent to assess Appuldurcombe’s prospects.

# Visiting In January 1778, Brown’s eldest son Lancelot, a knowledgeable bird-watcher it seems, climbed Appuldurcombe Down to inspect Sir Richard’s new granite obelisk (1774) in memory of his ancestor Sir Robert Worsley (d. 1747). ‘Lance’ later included the inscription in a letter to Joseph Banks, and, as if tasked by the ardent botanist, reported that he had failed to sight a rock ousel (European thrush).[[3]](#endnote-3) It is possible he had been accompanying his father.

# Although Brown’s surviving account book records only one 1781 payment, £50 guineas (a standard fee for a grand plan, in region of £7,600 today) Brown may have been consulted earlier than is generally accepted. Spurred on by his wife Seymour Fleming, a young heiress, whose mother had married Edwin Lascelles, perhaps he determined to match Harewood’s improved Yorkshire estate complete with romantic ruined castle. On occasion, for instance at Burghley, Wotton, and Enville, for convenience and speed, Brown sketched proposals on existing surveys, usually in pencil, before later presenting the client with a more considered, fully-fledged plan of improvement. What makes Brown’s Appuldurcombe design unusual, if not innovative, it is superimposed over William Watts survey in watercolour. Perhaps he had taken it back to his Hampton Court drawing office, for John Spyers, his talented assistant, a watercolourist, to add his proposals.

# The resulting plan inspired more planting to enclose the vicinity of the house and frame views to the obelisk and Cook’s Castle to picturesque effect, later recognised by Wiliam Gilpin. *‘Views of the sea, and various parts of the island, are judiciously opened about the house’*.[[4]](#endnote-4) Note the different sizes of trees ‘peppering’ the plan in the vicinity surrounding the house and along the circuit drive, as if suggesting new planting among existing mature trees, and, in contrast, unadorned open lawn around the house. Two groves, directly south of the house, at what John Phibbs would call ‘point blank’, reminiscent of the vista to Wimpole’s tower ruin or to the Pillar in Tottenham Park, were to punctuate the wide park panorama while framing the principal focus: Cook’s Castle. In July 1771 Captain Cook, sailing Endeavour back from Australia past the Isle of Wight, returned to Dover with Joseph Banks to much acclaim. One can only speculate whether Brown had conceived his set-piece ‘theatre of arrival’ while working for Philip Stephens. Secretary of the Navy, at Fulham, where Cook is said to have planted an oriental plane (still extant) beside Brown’s new lake.[[5]](#endnote-5)

# Undoubtedly the extension to the park and the improved approach made a significant change to Appuldurcombe’s ‘sense of place’, partly still discernible today. Designed views, starting from the door of All Saints Church, Godshill, were intentionally controlled, leading the eye towards the obelisk on the distant Appuldurcombe Down. Subsequently, visitors passed through a triumphal arch (the Freemantle Gateway was later named) to enjoy acres of verdant park pasture, with glimpses to the English Channel framed by clumps of trees, before then spying both eyecatchers, on the left horizon Cook’s Castle and above right the now nearer obelisk. At last, suddenly revealed, the house made an elegant tableau tucked below the down, screened by Brown’s planting in the heart of the park. On leaving the estate, the ribbon drive offered visitors equally charming and memorable views, especially of Godshill and its meaningful medieval church.

# A shallow, slug-like water feature in the shaded valley below Cook’s Castle was intended to ornament the main view from the house, not unlike Brown’s modest lake at Madingley. Rather than a full-scale lake to attract wild-fowl, and bring reflected light and animation for arriving and departing visitors, Brown may have suggested a water meadow with controlled flooding in season contriving a lake effect on view from the upper rooms of the house, while improving drainage for farming, as at Southill, Longleat or by the Thames at Syon. Considering a prominent, contoured man-made hillock to the left of the old approach, there is a distinct possibility that some excavation and damming a spring tributary of the River Yar was attempted, possibly not in the location indicated on the plan but further north to be seen from the new Freemantle Gateway approach. History does not record whether this proved difficult to manage or was deemed an unnecessary expense, once plans for the Sea-Cottage went ahead. [[6]](#endnote-6)

# Also, to enable better drainage of surrounding park pastures, Brown designed a reverse sunk fence in the valley below the house, and extended a deep, straight earlier stone-walled ha-ha around the inner park towards the west. The well-built, brick-lined icehouse beyond north has his hall-mark too, disguised under an insulating mound of earth, with its low-arch stone entrance facing north. The walled garden, the most useful Brown addition, prominently marked on Watts’s survey, located out of the way yet easily accessible and reasonably storm-protected in the lea of the hill. Though smaller than those at Burghley, Weston and Wimbledon, it is designed in much the same manner with adjacent orchards, its high walls and outbuildings screened by a thin enclosing belt so as not to detract from park views. Three of the four brick walls, on view from the drives are stone-clad, with height, coping and piers all typical of Brown, whose expertise had sealed his appointment as Royal Gardener. Much of his last decade, his practice keeping pace with every advancement, was spent advising in the fruit-growing areas of Kent, Lincolnshire, Somerset, and Worcestershire. So when he came to Appuldurcombe, Brown realised the potential of the temperate island location which lent itself to large-scale fruit-farming. [[7]](#endnote-7)

# In 1792, long after his employer’s death, Samuel Lapidge, his chief assistant in Hampton Court, corresponded with advice re planting a vineyard at Sea Cottage. Other collaborators continued his legacy along similar naturalistic design ideas, such as architect James Wyatt, working at Brocklesby, and many other Brown sites elsewhere, including Belvoir Castle alongside Brown’s foreman Adam Mickle. Enhancements at Appuldurcombe by subsequent owner Charles Anderson-Pelham, first Earl of Yarborough, (whose taste was noted in the introductory memorandum above), stemmed from his home estate, Brocklesby in north Lincolnshire, improved over a decade of regular Brown visits (1771-1782). Early childhood days here on an English oak pleasure barge on Brown’s Newsham lake likely instilled a passion for sailing for the self-styled Hon-Anderson-Pelham, later founder of the Royal Yacht Squadron. The Freemantle Lodge Gateway attributed to Wyatt, has echoes of Robert Adam’s classical gateway at Moor Park, another Brown landscape. This in turn inspired the later Memorial Arch (1864) entrance to Brocklesby.

# Whether the spring presence of rarely-seen narcissi, double jonquil bulbs *Telamonius plenus* ‘Van Sion’ in the Inner Park, as once planted by Brown at Stowe, are remnants of his advice at Appuldurcombe, or part of Elizabeth Banks’s late 20th century restoration, they add a Brownian connection to a spring walk. More importantly, considering two sketches in the Tate Collection, both Godshill and the obelisk on Appuldurcombe Down (See Tate Collection) caught the eye of JMW Turner. Brown’s design made full use of and succeeded in bringing these two features, together with Cook’s Castle ruin, as an affecting trinity of views united by and seen from his approach drive to make this domain uniquely memorable, scenes capable of stretching the imagination as far as the other side of the world, if not paradise! Hence, despite changes of ownership and management, and periods of decline and neglect, the significance of Appuldurcombe Park lives on in its situation ‘fine and romantic’.  Steffie Shields November 2016

1. Lincolnshire Archive Office. Yarb 11/2/2 Anon. Memorandum of a journey to London, Portsmouth & Isle of Wight, Autumn 1829 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Sir Richard Worsley *‘History of the Isle of Wight'* (1781): ‘*The different eminences command most extensive and grand prospects. On the east is seen St. Helen's road, Spithead, and Portsmouth; on the west, the Cliffs at Freshwater, the Dorsetshire coast, and the Isle of Portland; on the north is a view of the new Forest and the channel, by which the island is separated from the other part of the county; and on the south, is the British Channel‘.* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Dorothy Stroud, *‘Capability’ Brown* (Faber & Faber 1975 Revised Ed.1984) p204. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. William Gilpin, *Observations on the Western Parts of England to which are added a few remarks on the Picturesque Beauties of the Isle of Wight*, 1798. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Steffie Shields, *Moving Heaven & Earth* (Unicorn Press 2016) p.138. Brown’s naming of both Queen Anne’s Gate and Elizabeth Gate at Burghley also exemplifies a similar awareness of history. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Although no evidence exists, Sea Cottage is another possible Brown recommendation, considering his ‘Cottage Ornée’ overlooking the Solent at Cadland. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Lincolnshire Archive Office. I Worsley/55/41 Notebook pp 16,17 A list of fruit trees (about 200) planted at Appuldurcombe Park, 16 December 1780 is comprehensive and includes figs and vines. An intriguing link with Hampton Court survives with the feature ‘Hampton Court Gate’ in the pleasure ground wall leading in the direction of the walled garden. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)