

FISHERWICK HALL AND PARK

A LOST LANDSCAPE

Dianne Barre

Fisherwick Hall and Park in Staffordshire were designed by 'Capability' Brown, but they were destroyed within a generation. Neither remains today.

Situated just north of Lichfield, Elizabethan Fisherwick Hall was purchased by the 5th Earl (later Marquess) of Donegall in 1760. An extravagant young man, he commissioned Lancelot 'Capability' Brown to design a new Palladian house and to re-landscape the formal park, between 1766 and 1774.

The House

Brown's design for the house was very similar to his Croome Park in Worcestershire, and the interiors were elegant and splendid, as revealed in the sale particulars when house and estate were sold to pay off the Marquess's huge debts after his death in 1799.

Although 1808 sale details announced that the mansion was ideal 'for a family of the first Rank and Fortune' and the park 'a rich Assemblage of ornamented, elegant and rural scenery' - it fell to asset strippers. The house was demolished by 1815 and one of Brown's most attractive parks was destroyed, once the new owner realised how expensive it was to run.

The Park

When Brown came to landscape the 570-acre park it had two long formal avenues, much admired by Robert Plot in 1686, which were left *in situ*. More trees were scattered around the park in no special order. However, within forty years 100,000 trees were planted, including Brown's standard perimeter belts.

Close to the house an existing seven-acre cherry orchard had been enclosed on two sides by a brook from the nearby River Tame. Brown enlarged this brook into a naturalistic curved pool which he joined to a new long and narrow seven-acre lake, by a cascade and bridge.

Crossing this bridge the visitor reached the walled Kitchen Garden, which, rather unusually for Brown, included a delightful 'Ladies' Botanical Garden,' complete with its own Temple. Opposite were the lawns of the pleasure grounds with its walks and there were other plantations and shrubberies with walks, including one to a new greenhouse conservatory near the Cherry Orchard.



Capability Brown's landscape at Fisherwick Hall, a painting by John Spyers, 1786.

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Fisherwick was one of Brown's more inventive plans with its long walks centring on the lakes near the house and mature specimen trees on the lake banks and lawns. There was also a Chinese Pavilion and 'grotesque Seat' by the river on the boundary of the park, which overlooked meadows, 'a scene truly pastoral'.

When entertaining the Marquess erected marquees and 'a light moveable pavilion' in the pleasure grounds near the house, with splendid views to the lake.

Today there is just a muddy trickle of water in overgrown woodland which covers the former pleasure grounds: a totally lost landscape. ●

Dr Dianne Barre is an independent garden historian.

Further Reading

Anon. *A Companion to the Leasowes, Hagley and Enville, with a Sketch of Fisherwick* (G.G.J. & J. Robinson 1789).

W. Maguire, 'Brief Appearance of a Stately Home', *Country Life* 28 July 1983, pp.250-1

Tim Mowl and Dianne Barre, *The Historic Gardens of England: Staffordshire* (Redcliffe, 2008).