

FINANCIAL TIMES

Superior: interiors

APRIL 16 2011

how to spend it special interiors edition



PASTURES NEW

Inspired by the 18th-century work of Capability Brown, a clutch of landscape designers are restoring rolling pastoral parkland to British estates – even those of a more modest scale. Tim Richardson charts the rise of the “pocket park”.

A 20-acre estate designed by Todd Longstaffe-Gowan in Wiltshire reflects the Anglo-Chinois style, which was one of the key influences on the work of Capability Brown.

Lancelot “Capability” Brown, Britain’s most celebrated landscape designer, exercised a virtual monopoly over large-scale landscape work in the late 18th century. Brown is said to have quipped that he had no urge to work in Ireland – or Scotland, for that matter – because he had not yet “finished England”. His work remains largely intact at scores of great estates, including Petworth, Blenheim and Croome Court (now being restored by the National Trust). A business entrepreneur and a practical man, Brown was

reputedly given his nickname because of his penchant for revealing to amazed clients the hidden potential of their land (though in a new biography – *The Omnipotent Magician*, published by Chatto & Windus – Jane Brown says the moniker wasn’t used in his own lifetime).

But who are the Capabilities *de nos jours*? A handful of British consultants have made landscape parks their speciality, and they say it is perfectly possible to realise something of the classic Brownian pastoral style on a much more modest scale – making what might be termed “pocket parks”. Brown’s style is characterised by rolling sward right up to the house, with animals kept





Left: the parterre at the Tregothnan Estate in Cornwall was redesigned by Robert Myers.
Below: Bramham Park in Yorkshire was restored to its pastoral state by The Landscape Agency and now hosts the Leeds Festival.



out of the garden by means of a ha-ha, a kind of ditch that acts as an invisible sunken fence; clumps of trees artfully disposed; a decorous topography (sometimes the result of earth-moving); and elegant ornamental lakes or serpentine rivers. It's easy to take such things for granted during a visit to one of his masterpieces, but that is part of the point: you're not supposed to notice.

Patrick James, managing director of The Landscape Agency, started out as a journalist on *Country Life* magazine before going into landscape consultancy in the mid-1990s. "These days a lot of people will buy a farm of, say, 250 to 300 acres," he says. "Any less than that and it won't be viable agriculturally. They want some livestock, and they might tenant out some land. But the aesthetic and environmental aspects are just as important."

James says that it's perfectly possible to create a pocket park in a plot of 50 acres, or less. As he points out, there was a landscaping genre in the late-18th and early-19th centuries dubbed *ferme ornée*; a working farm with ornamental elements, such as buildings and composed vistas across working fields. "A 'pocket park' of this kind could also become a kind of nature reserve," adds James. "You could have an interesting wildflower mix in the grassland, and there would be all the hedgerows and many, many more trees. By putting in a park you would bring in nature, or biodiversity, completely naturally."

One of James's projects is at Gunton in north Norfolk, where a consortium of private owners engaged him to reinstate the Grade II parkland, long laid down to arable. One of the ruined follies "looked out over a boring prairie landscape that was once wonderful – designed by Repton and WS Gilpin [in the early-19th century]. I used

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old maps and plans to see what had been there. We reinstated two huge ornamental lakes that had silted up and restored a proper, fully managed red deer herd to the pasture. We also put back some Gilpin amoeboid clumps of deciduous trees and recreated some marvellous vistas."

James's portfolio also includes the 1,000-acre Weston Park in Shropshire, an original Capability landscape where conifers planted in the 1950s were removed to make way for mixed estate woodland. The estate at Boughton in Northamptonshire (pictured overleaf) is another renovation project undertaken by The Landscape Agency, the extensive grounds having been laid out by the 1st Duke of Montagu and his son in the late-17th and early-18th century. "At the heart of the design," says James, "was the idea to 'canalise' a river as well as plant hundreds of lime trees in formal double, triple and even quintuple avenues." And at another of his projects, Bramham Park in Yorkshire (pictured above right), he is surprisingly enthusiastic about the annual music festival held on pasture. "It does take two months for the ground to recover," he admits, "but it's a great way for all those people to experience a Grade I listed landscape park."

For London-based Todd Longstaffe-Gowan, it is often the case that a client will initially be interested in the

garden areas around the house, only becoming interested in the wider landscape once the garden is finished. "A lot of people don't foresee a wonderful landscape park when they arrive and just rent out the land to farmers," he says. "While in the past husbandry was very important, it isn't any longer, and it can be difficult to persuade people to spend money to put arable land back into pasture. In my experience, you start with the garden and then work your way outwards, gradually – taking out the fences." Once a designer has won over a client's confidence, anything is possible. For instance, at one private estate

in Wiltshire, Longstaffe-Gowan has created a lake with a Chinoiserie theme (pictured on opening spread), reflecting his belief that the English landscape garden stemmed from the late-17th-century trend for "Anglo-Chinois".

For Longstaffe-Gowan – also a noted landscape historian and garden adviser at the Historic Royal Palaces – it is the big scale that appeals; the way an estate sits in its historic and topographical context. "If the acreage is quite small, you can 'borrow' the neighbouring landscape," he advises. "That way, you increase the apparent size of the estate by visual means – let your neighbours do the work!"

Landscape designer Robert Myers does not like to think in terms of acreage at all. "It's all to do with the relationship between the house and the land," he says. "If you have the M25 there, it's never going to succeed." Myers places particular emphasis on the approach to the house – the course of the entrance drive and the way visitors arrive in front of the house. "I always begin with the drive," he says. "I like to think of them as sequences of views that unfold, that idea of moving through the landscape. The house should appear and then disappear, and your eye should never follow the same angle twice when looking towards it. Driveways are important for owners – it's how they announce themselves." This was something that also exercised Brown and his successor, Humphry Repton (who in the early-19th century landscaped the Tregothnan estate in Cornwall, pictured above, whose parterre has been redesigned by Myers).

At Piers Court in Stinchcombe, Gloucestershire, a house that once belonged to Evelyn Waugh, Myers is



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rerouting the drive to take a slightly more circuitous route, adding or clearing vegetation to create new views or screen out obtrusive elements. "As it was, the drive just took you in, and you were there straightaway," he says. He also plans to open up gaps in a dense belt of trees that previous owners planted to create privacy. Myers sees such moves as mistakes born of the use of gardening techniques in a parkland setting. "We looked at some old *Country Life* pictures and saw that there used to be just a few estate trees on the hill," recalls Myers. "Then, you could look through these trees and appreciate the vista, which created the impression that the park just continued. So we're taking it back to that."

Not everyone wants a purely pastoral approach, however, and the work of East Anglia-based designer George Carter synthesises the parkland look with a highly individual style that he is happy to admit owes more to Repton than it does to Brown, incorporating formal interventions such as statuary, buildings, avenues of trees, canals and other water features. "Quite a lot of the jobs I have are about imposing some sort of geometry on the site," notes Carter. "To start with, it's nice if your house can be at the centre of the estate, though it hardly ever is," he says. He observes, too, that quite often the entrance fronts of 18th-century houses are the best side architecturally, and the surrounds can be "turned around" so that the best façade is facing the garden, with parking and cars removed elsewhere. Carter also suggests that an unflattering approach can sometimes be remedied by devising a strategic route up to the house,



citing Repton's injunction that the final approach should ideally be at a 45-degree angle.

For Carter, former farmhouses present their own challenges and opportunities. "They tend to be sited on roads," he says. "And they often have just one 'good' facade, facing the road, while the rest is higgledy-piggledy." On the other hand, the buildings around the farmyard can be a great asset, as they "engage in a much better way with the land. A barn can become the equivalent of an 18th-century drawing room."

Like the other designers, Carter is a great believer in the "borrowed view" concept. He mentions an estate in Devon where a secondary estate house was visible on the other side of the valley. "To bring it into the scene, as it were, we put an obelisk on the brow of the hill to draw the eye there," he says. At another estate, in north Norfolk, the clients wanted to use the land for equestrian purposes, so Carter designed a series of fields fenced off with metal park railings (as opposed to a more visually intrusive post-and-rail option), creating an impression of parkland rather than paddocks by planting clumps

Above: the "canalised" river at the heart of Boughton, Northamptonshire, restored by The Landscape Agency. Left: a formal lime avenue by George Carter at a Suffolk estate.

of trees in field corners. "The trick I always use when 'de-agriculturising' an estate is basically to hide the boundaries, both of the estate itself and the fields within it – which is what Repton did," he says. "If you take the corners out of the fields, you lose the farm aspect. Then I create vistas out from the house by slightly formalising the foreground." Interpolating formal features, such as an avenue of trees extending into the park at an estate in Suffolk (pictured left) is something both Brown and Repton did.

The good news is that much of this Capability Brown-inspired activity can potentially be offset by grants from the government. The Environmental Stewardship Scheme run by Natural England provides various grants to private owners for projects that enhance the natural environment – which might include tree planting, de-silting lakes and turning arable land back into pasture – and can, according to Patrick James, run to as much as 75 per cent of the total cost. And there is no expectation that the estate should be opened to the public. "The reason Natural England backs this, says James, "is because you are coming to them and saying, 'Look, we are going to restore this wonderful landscape park to its former glory. Not only will it look good, it will work environmentally.'" It's enough to make you wonder why more pocket parks are not already gracing the landscape. ♦

VERY CAPABLE INDEED

George Carter, grcarter@easynet.co.uk. **The Landscape Agency**, 020-7371 6303; www.landscapeagency.co.uk. **Natural England**, 08456-003 078; www.naturalengland.org.uk. **Robert Myers Associates**, 01544-232 035; www.robertmyers-associates.co.uk. **Todd Longstaffe-Gowan**, 020-7253 2100; www.tlg-landscape.co.uk.