

‘CAPABILITY BROWN’ AT COMPTON VERNEY

BY PROFESSOR STEVEN PARISSIEN

In the 1760s and 70s Compton Verney in Warwickshire was transformed by two of Britain’s most gifted innovators: the architect Robert Adam, who had soared to almost overnight celebrity at the accession of King George III in 1760, and the nation’s premier landscape designer, Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown. The latter, now at the height of his fame, was afforded the autonomy to create what was possibly his first ‘minimalist’ landscape, in which garden buildings and tree cover were kept to a minimum and more emphasis was placed on providing a forum for leisure activities such as shooting, fishing and riding – and on fashioning a distinctly ‘English’ setting for these pastimes.

By 1768 Brown was at the height of his fame. Four years earlier he had been appointed Royal Gardener to King George III, and his towering reputation meant that, at Compton Verney, he was free to refine his radical new vision. He eliminated all trace of the existing formal gardens and replaced them with undulating grassland

and trees. In addition, the medieval Chapel at the north edge of the old ponds was ruthlessly swept away. Brown evidently objected to the building’s location, which was presumably judged to interfere with his planned sightlines; but not, apparently, to its contents, which were largely decanted into the new Chapel built to the north-west of the house in 1776-9.

Both documentary and stylistic evidence proves that the Chapel was Brown’s work alone, and that he did not work with Adam at all here. A plain double-cube, with pews set laterally as in a college chapel, the Chapel’s eastern Venetian window suggests a building of the 1720s rather than the 1770s. The interior is dominated by the tomb of Sir Richard and Margaret Verney, designed after 1631 by the celebrated sculptor- architect Nicholas Stone. Brown deliberately placed this feature centre-stage, and in many ways appears to have built his new Chapel round it. The reason for this may not just lie in the tomb’s virtuoso carving: Stone himself was, in 1776, a far more famous artistic figure than he is today.



The tomb, along with most of the wall and floor memorials and much of the old building's late-medieval glass, came from the Chapel's medieval predecessor. Brown's new windows were also, though, provided with panels of German Renaissance stained glass, assembled by an antique dealer whom Lord North – brother-in-law of the 14th Baron Willoughby de Broke who commissioned both Adam and Brown at Compton Verney – had already employed for a similar purpose at his own home of Wroxton Abbey.

The magnificent tomb and the wall-mounted monuments are still there today. Tragically, though, soon after the chapel's interior had been recorded by *Country Life* in 1913, its splendid stained glass was removed by the site's then owner, the 2nd Baron Manton, in an act of scandalous architectural vandalism. (In 1931 Manton sold the glass at auction.) Sixty years later, a later owner also removed the Chapel's pews, though fortunately most of the woodwork was kept on site.

Since 1993, both the Grade I-listed house and its surrounding park have belonged to the Compton Verney House Trust (CVHT), the independent charitable trust which now runs the site. In the mid-1990s Rodney Melville and Partners restored the mansion to serve as a major art gallery while Stanton Williams added a large wing to house a large exhibition

space, restaurant, café and shop. In 2011 CVHT won grants to effect emergency repairs to the Chapel – principally involving the safeguarding of the deteriorating plaster ceiling and the reinstallation of the pews and pulpit. At the same time, Natural England generously supported the restoration of Brown's thatched Ice House of 1772. Then, in 2015, CVHT successfully bid for a £2.5 million Heritage Lottery Fund grant towards a £3.7 million park restoration project, an ambitious scheme designed to restore, enhance and re-animate Brown's historic, Grade II*-listed landscape in order to attract new, more diverse audiences. Work by Purcell architects and their contractor, Croft, began at the end of 2015, and by the autumn of 2016 CVHT had added a newbuild Welcome Centre and Park Maintenance Building (the last of which was dug into the hillside), conserved and reopened the Grade I-listed chapel, introduced a ferry crossing of the lake, reintroduced many of Brown's original pathways, and installed new boardwalks, hides and other features designed to help our visitors to enjoy the wildlife and flora of the site. Further west, a section of Brown's Ha-Ha – overgrown and ruinous by 1993 – was repaired.

The principal conservation element of the project, however, concerned the Chapel. After 1945, when the main house was abandoned, the Chapel was rarely visited, let alone used. By 1993 the plasterwork of William Hiatt's coffered ceiling was decaying badly; the

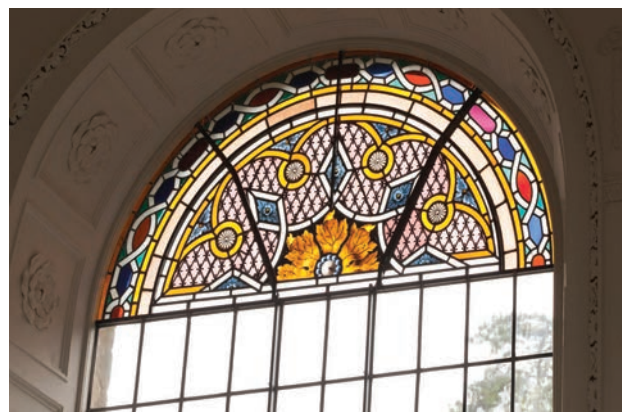


Above, Nicholas Stone's splendid double tomb of c.1631, with the restored pulpit in the background.

guttering was seriously corroded; the 1929 windows – mottled toilet glass set in poor-quality wooden frames – were boarded up; the original window spandrels (the only elements that Manton had left in situ) broken and smashed; and the east end dais covered by an ungainly wooden platform.

During the spring and summer of 2016 – having waited patiently for the bats in the roofspace to get properly settled – the plasterwork was restored, the monuments conserved, and the whole Chapel repainted. Paint analysis by Patrick Baty had shown that the original wall colour was, predictably, a pale stone. Patrick also discovered that much of the applied wall decoration was not part of the original Brown scheme but was actually added in the 1930s, and was made not of plaster but of papier-mâché. However, the decision was made to retain this work as part of the history of the building. In the windows, the remnants of the six stained-glass window spandrels were used to create three complete window heads for the north wall. The rest of the openings were filled with leaded panes of high-quality heritage glass from Poland.

Up above, the roof slates were conserved and, where necessary, replaced; the guttering was renewed; and the grouting that had been applied to the underside of the slates' battens in the nineteenth century – which had fallen off over the years and was now pressing heavily



Above, One of the restored window-heads, using original glass of c.1776



Above, View of Compton Verney from the west, showing the Townsend's elevation of c.1711 and the modern wing of 1993-5 by Stanton Williams.

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MTA were appointed M&E Consultants for the Compton Verney Project in 2014 seeing it through to completion in 2016. The project aim of improving the visitor experience involved a new Welcome Centre, a new Grounds Maintenance Building and refurbishments to the Grade I Listed Chapel.

MTA provided a sustainable energy options report and recommendations for the services installations, including specialist lighting and control systems. The scheme also involved temporary diversion of the communications and signal links between the Welcome Centre and Estate Office. In the Chapel, MTA designed the pew heating and lighting system and an aspirating fire alarm system.

MTA were also M&E Consultants for the early stages of the Crossness Pumping Station project which included installation of a biomass boiler and introduction of services to enhance the visitor experience.

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upon the plaster ceiling below – was painstakingly removed. More practically, heating and modest lighting were also introduced and the Victorian bellcote restored – with a bellrope re-introduced into the gallery.

The conservation work has returned a rare, indeed a unique building – Brown designed no similar Chapel in Britain – to life. It can now be used for a variety of purposes, from weddings and lectures to services (the building is still consecrated) and concerts (thanks to its superb acoustic). It provides Compton Verney with an invaluable asset which can be used to build different, diverse audiences as well as to entertain and impress existing visitors. ■



Above, The restored north windows
Opposite, The tomb of Richard and Margaret Verney, looking west.



Above, William Hiatt's coffered plaster ceiling, as expertly restored.