

Anniversary Capability Pig

by Linden Groves



Is Capability Brown's legacy being upheld by that other great British icon, Peppa Pig?

Like him or loathe him, Lancelot 'Capability' Brown is undoubtedly one of England's great cultural exports, turning much of the country to landscape park in the 18th century, and influencing many across the world to copy his approach to garden design. The tercentenary of his birth falls in 2016 and garden history fans are taking it as a welcome excuse to celebrate historic gardens, especially Brownian ones, and to try to spark an interest in the subject amongst the more general population. Surviving Capability

Brown landscapes are throwing open their gates and welcoming visitors to admire their carefully preserved Brown lakes, beautifully restored views, and spectacularly managed parkland. (Details of all events during the Capability Brown Festival 2016 can be found on www.capabilitybrown.org.)

One Capability Brown landscape, Paultons Park in Hampshire, is enjoying a rather different popularity, welcoming one million visitors with a demographic as fresh and diverse as the Festival could possibly dream of. But these

visitors have not come for Brown. His landscape is best known today as the site of Peppa Pig World, having been designated as the home of the porcine animation beloved of television watchers under the age of six in, apparently, 180 countries.

Before we delve deeper into the now-iconic landscape of our heroine, Peppa Pig, let's backtrack and take a look at Paultons' brush with Capability Brown. (The place name comes from John de Palton, who owned the property in the 14th century.) Brown was commissioned by owner Hans Stanley in 1772, and duly worked his familiar magic, making a horseshoe lake out of a twisting river and tweaking woodland into a scenic tree belt. This work at Paultons came late in Brown's prolific career, after he had already left his mark at Stowe, Chatsworth and Blenheim.

After Brown's intervention, Paultons Park continued to enjoy gracious living through various twists and turns of Stanley-Sloane family ownership until the mid-20th century, when its fortunes began to slip. The Stanley-Sloanes turned it into a hotel, which closed down in 1955. The estate was put up for sale but, while it was on the market, in 1963 the house burned down, leaving the landscape design without its intended focus. This is always devastating for the integrity of a place, and was compounded here by a decision to split the site into different sale lots.

In 1979 the lot of the central garden area and lake caught the attention of local farmers John and Anne Mancey, who bought it and consequently launched the second pivotal phase in the development of Paultons' landscape. The Manceys cleared and renovated the now-neglected and overgrown gardens and in 1983 opened them as a country park attraction, where families could come to enjoy the

gardens that they lovingly developed, as well as the animals and birds that had been introduced to provide a pleasurable 'day out' experience. The other Paultons Park lots, in separate ownership, were also developed to create a golf course in the parkland and new houses in the walled garden. Despite all this, today the Brownian tree plantations remain,

some splendid cedars survive, Brown's bridge rests next to the diverted drive, and the lake Brown created still flourishes.

John and Anne Mancey retired in 1995 but their son Richard and his wife Sara had been involved in their country park business from the start, subsequently taking on responsibility for running the business, which they still do today. Under Richard and Sara's watch the country park evolved into a theme park, with the animals and birds gradually taking a back seat to rollercoasters and log flumes, although the development of beautiful gardens and facilitating access to nature continue to be key parts of the park's offering to visitors.

Today, Paultons Park is one of the leading theme parks in the UK, its million visitors making it one of Capability Brown's most seen landscapes. In 2011, Paultons welcomed popular animation character Peppa Pig, shaping the landscape into a life-sized replica of the

television show, and creating an idealised rural microcosm that heightens families' senses to make them feel as if they have stepped into her world. In 2016, the year of Capability Brown's tercentenary, Peppa has been joined by dinosaurs, their 'rediscovery' at Paultons Park after millennia celebrated in a new Lost Kingdom attraction with state-of-the-art rollercoasters and lavish Jurassic-inspired landscaping.

These 21st-century landscapes are generating the kind of excitement that Brown fans could only dream of, but what would Brown think of his site these days?



3. THE NORTH FRONT AND TOPIARY GARDEN, FROM THE LAKE



Opposite page: Green slopes, grassy swards, carefully placed trees, eye-catching ornamental buildings, serpentine paths and opportunity for amusement all characterise the landscape of Peppa Pig World – as they did the creations of Capability Brown. Above top: Paultons Park in 1938 before the house burned down. Above bottom: The landscape in its heyday, with the house surrounded by the lake and ornamental trees.



Of course, it's deeply regrettable that the house he knew is no longer standing, which means that the landscape has lost its intended focal point. Successive changes to the area over the years make it very difficult to read the Brownian landscape from the ground so the enthusiast is limited to tantalising glimpses through the trees, or admiring the Brownian tree plantations that loom over the car parks, with their cedars and pines (although these have suffered damage, first in the storms of 1987 and then from lightning strike). As a landscape historian with a passion for seeing these places conserved and cherished in the 21st century, it is difficult for me not to feel frustrated that Brown's work has to an extent been swept away.

But wait a minute ... there is arguably no one in garden history better at sweeping away earlier landscapes than Brown himself, who was merciless in brushing aside existing gardens to create new features for the enjoyment of a new generation. How apt then to find this same treatment of Brown's work at Paultons, where the demands of our generation for modern entertainment and

amusement have seen Brown, once so fashionable himself, sidelined in favour of the current crazes for Peppa Pig and dinosaurs.

It is more than possible that Brown might have been rather sympathetic and interested in the recent management of Paultons Park. For example, he would certainly have been extremely familiar with today's business model at Paultons. In the 18th century estates were run as businesses and the landscapes, although decorative, were also practical creations that washed their faces, economically, bringing in revenue through the harvesting of their tree plantations and the farming of cattle and sheep. In this, they were a key part of the British economy, supporting the local community with what we would now call 'employment opportunities'.

Brown would be thrilled to see that at Paultons Park his landscape is a major local employer – more than 600 staff work at the theme park in peak season. And, again continuing the pattern set by 18th century society, it is notable that Paultons is owned by a family, rather than a corporation, and currently run by the second generation, who are looking forward to passing it on to the third generation, with Richard and Sara Mancey's son and daughter already playing a key role in its management.

Brown would also have been engaged by current landscape management approaches at Paultons – at the Manceys' treatment of his lake, for example. When they bought the site in the 1980s, the lake that Brown had formed by reshaping a river was completely silted up. The Manceys spent huge sums of money on dredging the silt away, and were keen not to let it build up again. So they chiselled a small part off of the side of the lake and allowed it to flow as a river again, facilitated by the construction of a

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“Before Magma plummets to the ground, riders have the best aerial view of a Capability Brown landscape they could ever hope for”

with the visual buzz and thrill of the theme park's many attractions.

A passion for nature has also been carried through from the 18th century to the 21st at Paultons. Thousands of plants are used to create the desired ornamental effect in a place where gardens are very much part of the lure: 50,000 plants are going into the new Lost Kingdom, including 8m (26ft) high trees being moved in maturity for instant effect – a bold technique much exploited by Brown.

One of the park's most popular rides, Magma (a 'drop' ride in which visitors sit on a platform that rises 25 metres and pauses for a moment before dropping at high speed), uses many tricks that would be familiar to garden creators of the 18th century. Visitors are faced with a volcano created by man's determination alone, then channelled through a forbidding doorway into dark tunnels of artificial rockwork and treated to occasional taunting glimpses of the ride ahead, before emerging nervously into a chamber with the ride. Here, with the only view of daylight up above, they seat

themselves in anticipation with their racing imaginations being tipped over the edge when a puff of volcanic smoke seeps through the rock. Perfectly for the landscape historian, in the split second at the top of the Magma ride before it plummets to the ground, riders have the best aerial view of a



Above left and right: Theme park rides sit jauntily alongside Capability Brown's lake and create an animated view across it.

Left: John and Anne Mancey in 1988 in the gardens they loved at Paultons Park.

Opposite page: An aerial view of Paultons Park. Before it burned down, the house was situated within the path system at the centre of the shot.



Capability Pig



Top left: Peppa tops an eye-catching obelisk.
Top: The striking structure of a modern ride.
Above left: Animals animate the landscape of Peppa Pig World.
Above right: Undulation provides visual and physical excitement.
Left: Capability Brown's lake is still beautiful in the 21st century.

Capability Brown landscape they could ever hope for.

But what is undoubtedly the most thought-provoking similarity between the landscape of Paultons today and that of the 18th century is the undeniable similarity between the design techniques of Capability Brown and of Peppa Pig. This is perhaps not surprising when you consider that both have been inspired by art – Brown by the work of landscape painters such as Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin, and Peppa by the animators at Astley Baker Davies. The result is that at Paultons Peppa Pig and her friends – from Rebecca Rabbit to Suzy Sheep – live in an arcadian world that Brown would most certainly recognise from his own design palette.

Serpentine paths lead the visitor amongst bucolic slopes of grass so green as to seem almost artificial, on which are carefully placed trees, each chosen with an eye to the detail of its shape and shade. Everywhere are quirky and delightful buildings, judiciously set amongst the hills so as to catch your eye and entice you along the twisting paths and up the slopes. When you peer inside, almost certainly an unusual personage such as Daddy Pig will be waiting to greet you.

And all of this is such fun, such an opportunity to escape the reality of everyday life. Who can resist the temptation to take a row on Peppa's boating lake, or to make a circuit of the gardens, admittedly not in a pony and trap, but at least in an extremely ornamental railway carriage? Everything here has been meticulously designed to be of impeccable taste, from the railings to the benches, to the choice of colours for each of the features.

If Capability Brown began our passion for taking nature, improving it, and presenting it back to us as though it were untouched by artifice, then Peppa Pig World has surely perfected that fine art. It is easy to imagine that Brown would be rather flattered – and even impressed – were he to see this centrepiece of his landscape today. 🌸

Linden Groves is a landscape historian with a particular interest in children in the historic environment (www.outdoorchildren.co.uk). She would like to offer her thanks to the teams at Paultons Park and the Hampshire Gardens Trust for their help in preparing this article.