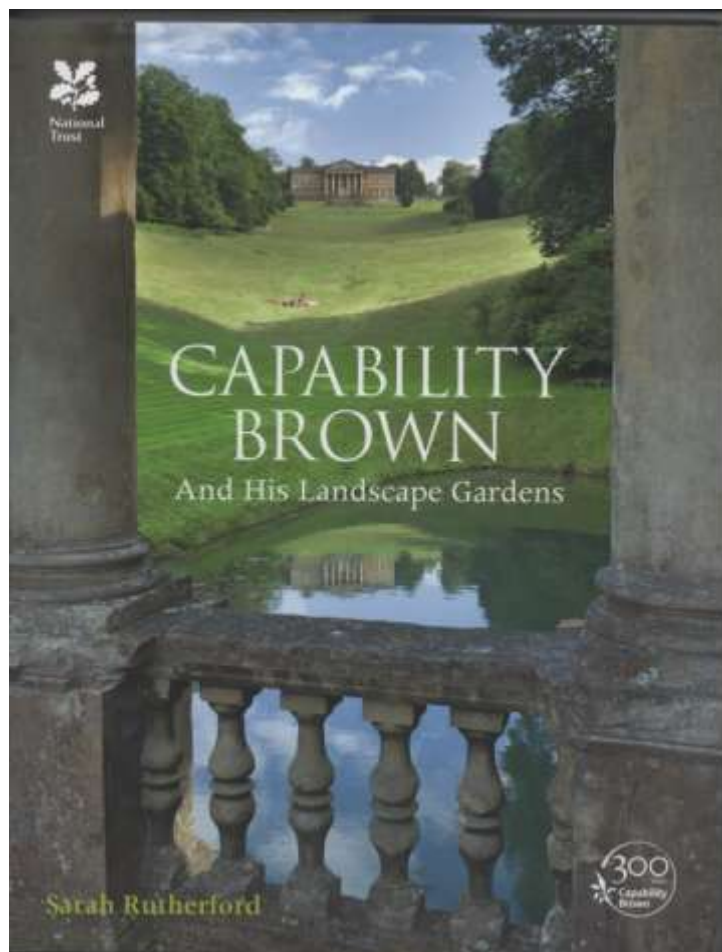


GREEN SCENE

Capability Brown's 300th Anniversary

by Elaine Golds

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This book, recently published by the National Trust in Great Britain, documents the achievements of England's most famous landscaper.

While the City of Coquitlam is busy celebrating its 125th anniversary, gardeners in Great Britain are celebrating the 300th Anniversary of the birth of Lancelot “Capability” Brown. Brown, born in August 1716, was a highly-regarded landscaper who had a huge influence on the design of the country estates of many of England’s aristocrats. He is credited with designing more than 250 sites which cover a total of almost 520 square kilometres miles in Britain.

In Coquitlam, we are lucky to have an impressive landscape that is very much influenced by the ideas of Capability Brown – none other than the beautiful Riverview lands.

Brown received the nickname of Capability because he commonly explained to his clients that their estates had capability, i.e., potential, to become spectacular and natural-looking scenic jewels. Brown, born into humble circumstances, became an estate worker at age 16 in Northumberland where he quickly grasped the principles of landscaping. Within 9 years, he had honed his natural talents sufficiently to become a Head Gardener. He also proved adept at managing a large crew and set about naturalizing a large estate near Stowe. After a few years, Brown established such a reputation for landscaping that he became an independent contractor and spent the rest of his life designing or redesigning country estates across Britain.

Prior to the 1700s, estates in England were typically highly contrived landscapes with a number of straight pathways radiating out from a single point with formal, intricate and geometrically-shaped gardens. In this regard, they were much influenced by the French style of gardening. Such landscaping was totally artificial and required many hours of work to keep plants trimmed into unnatural shapes. Brown's ideas were revolutionary. He promoted what we would call today "working with nature".

Brown favoured grand pastoral landscapes which offered sweeping views complemented by natural-looking groups of trees. To create these landscapes, he often transformed the land by damming rivers to form lakes, draining bogs and creating slopes from flat land which looked completely natural and were far more pleasing to the eye. His designed landscapes also included pastures which were cleverly separated from more formal lawns by the use of what was called a ha-ha – a visually hidden brick wall beyond which the land dropped a few feet and thus created a barrier for grazing animals. Brown used grouping of trees to highlight views or hide unsightly areas. His paths were graciously curved rather than straight and were designed to slowly reveal views around each bend.

Brown was fortunate to be landscaping at a time when many new species of trees were being imported to Britain from the colonies. He included many of these new trees into his plantings. These included species such as the Ginkgo which was introduced to England in 1754, as well as many species from eastern North America such as the majestic tulip trees which vie with our native cottonwood for being the tallest deciduous tree in North America. Brown was skilled at using deciduous trees to create visually appealing changes to his landscapes throughout the seasons. He was said to have been especially fond of Lebanon cedars and London planes – a hardy hybrid sycamore with one parent from eastern North America and the other from south-eastern Europe. All of the trees used by Brown in his landscaping can also be viewed on the Riverview grounds in Coquitlam.

The aristocrats of England were especially enthusiastic about the results of Brown's naturalistic landscapes as they provided copses of trees which supported the game they liked to hunt and lakes where fishing and boating could be pleasurable activities. The pastures which dropped off from groomed lawns offered distant picturesque views of their prize-winning horses or herds of cattle. Obviously, Brown's clients had to be wealthy to afford his services. Yet the landscapes that Brown created for the entitled were the antecedents of what today we could consider to be landscape parks for the people such as Stanley Park in Vancouver and Central Park in New York City.

With its created landscapes of groves of trees intermingled with heritage buildings, curved roadways and delightful vistas, the Riverview Hospital site also has many features which encapsulate the landscaping principles of Capability Brown. With its outstanding tree collection, Riverview offers a pleasing palate of colours throughout the seasons and thoughtful groupings of related trees which facilitate botanical

comparisons. While Riverview does not have a lake, its grounds once reached all the way down to the Coquitlam River which is augmented by several small streams which flow down Riverview's slopes.

The leafy glades of Riverview offer impressive views of some truly majestic oaks, lindens and chestnuts. The upcoming TreeFest event at Riverview on Sunday, September 11 from 11am-4 pm hosted by the Riverview Horticultural Centre Society and the City of Coquitlam offer members of the public free hourly tree tours and a heritage building walk. This annual event, now in its 23rd year, provides an opportunity to experience Riverview's beautiful landscapes and fascinating history inspired, in part, by the visionary ideas of Capability Brown.