

'constant walking of the public on these beds' and compacting of the soil, the City Engineer suggested to the Streets Committee that a 'chestnut pale fence be placed around the garden as a temporary measure in place of the iron railings which were removed during the war'.⁴¹ In October a number of firms were invited to tender to provide chain link fencing, the successful company being The Darlington Fencing Company. Other post-war improvements included installation of a bandstand in 1955 with a railed seating area replacing shrubbery (*fig. 64*). The Bowling Green was considerably enlarged in 1968 and a new pavilion replaced the earlier garden structure; this pavilion was adapted as a wine bar in 1985. Re-landscaping works took place in Finsbury Circus Garden in the 1990s, including restoration of the bandstand. The garden is listed Grade II on the *Register of Historic Parks and Gardens of special historic interest* on Historic England's National Heritage List for England.

However, since 2010 Finsbury Circus Garden, with its impressive bowling green, picturesque drinking fountain, floral displays and sheltering London plane trees (*fig. 65*), has been largely obscured by hoardings within the Crossrail Liverpool Street construction site, due to be restored with new landscaping by Tom Stuart-Smith Ltd in 2017 as part of the launch of the Elizabeth Line, which comes into operation in 2018. Its reinstatement post-Crossrail is undoubtedly eagerly awaited by the many City workers and visitors who have been deprived of its restful atmosphere.

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who commissioned this research
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to inform the reconfiguration
of the garden at
Finsbury Circus following Crossrail
construction works

JOHN SPYERS' CHRONICLE OF THE DECAY OF REGAL SPLENDOUR AT HAMPTON COURT PALACE

By Todd Longstaffe-Gowan

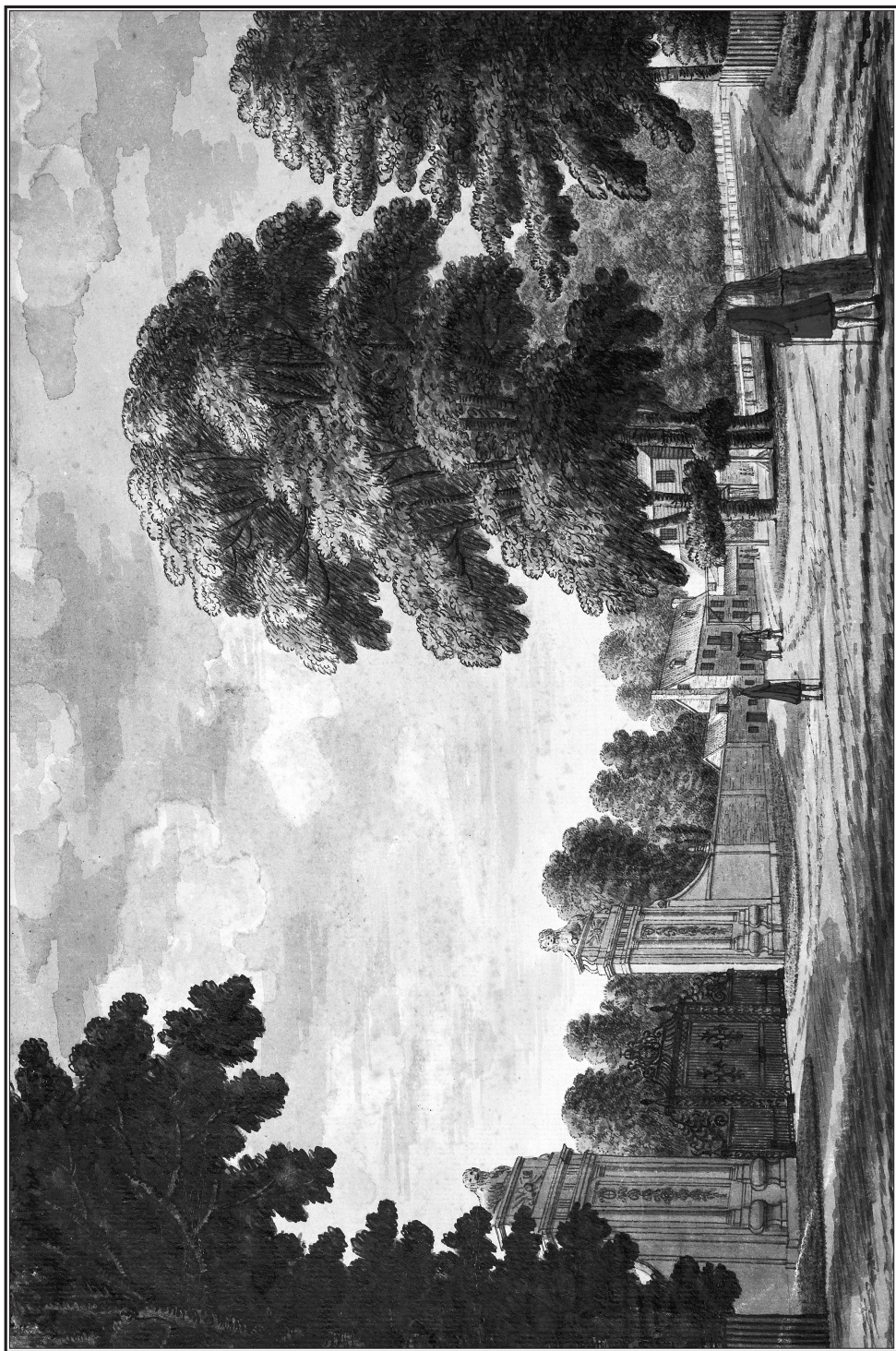
On the 10TH May 2016 the 'Brown Advisor' - the modern champion of 'Capability Brown studies' - having visited the exhibition 'The Empress and the Gardener' at Hampton Court Palace featuring John Spyers' eighteenth-century topographical survey of the palace and its surroundings, was prompted to observe in his post 255, 'How serious is Hampton Court?': 'is this actually what the English landscape looked like, and have we for two and a half centuries since been living the lie that in the eighteenth century England's land was green and pleasant, when actually it was tired and old, neglected and sad. Has it taken all this time to make that lie a truth?' He continued to remark on the 12TH May in his post 257 that Spyers' drawings suggest that Brown 'took little care' of the palace grounds, 'from which he drew a considerable income after being appointed the master gardener by George III'; and he concluded on the 5TH June in post 260 that Spyers' drawings provide 'indisputable evidence' that Brown was 'neglecting Hampton Court'.

These are bold and provocative observations, which challenge our conventional views of one of England's most ingenious and celebrated landscape improvers. What better time to air them than during the tercentenary celebrations of Brown's birth? Who better to do so than the Brown Advisor who over the past year has wrestled playfully with hundreds of aspects of Brown and his oeuvre, and whose eccentric charm and unbridled enthusiasm for his subject has galvanised many persons to reappraise Brown and his enduring legacy?

Brown lived at Hampton Court from 1764 until his death in 1783, during which time he served as Chief Gardener to His Majesty at Hampton Court. For almost two decades the palace grounds were his centre of operations - from here he ventured forth to every corner of the kingdom to create some of Britain's most

41. Report to the Streets Committee on 10 June 1947.

1. The Brown Advisor [John Phibbs]: *300 Frequently Asked Questions about Capability Brown*.



66. John Spyers, *The Lion Gates at Hampton Court Palace*, pencil and watercolour wash, late 1770s
(© HISTORIC ROYAL PALACES)

celebrated landscapes. One might therefore expect that the royal gardens were like so many of the gardens he worked on, exemplary of the modern taste in landscape gardening and reasonably well kept. This does not appear to have been the case: in October 1770 Brown was reproached by William Robinson, Clerk-Itinerant to the Board of Works, because they were not 'in so good condition as they ought to be...none of the Walkes being fit for use, and most of the other parts of the Gardens much neglected'. Brown refuted this imputation, saying he was 'the first King's Gardiner that the Board of Works had ever interfered with', asserting that 'I know the Gardens are in exceedingly good order, & I can assure you that I lay out an hundred Pounds a Year more than my Predecessor did, my wish & my intention is to keep them better & put them in better order than ever I saw them in, & have stopp'd at no Expense in procuring Trees and Plants, nor grudged any number of Hands that were necessary'.²

Spyers' drawings suggest otherwise. The much vilified Robinson may have had a point: during Brown's long tenure at Hampton Court the gardens appear to have been more than a little forlorn.

Spyers' pencil and watercolour wash drawings are contained within two albums entitled 'Drawings of the Royal Palace &c. at Hampton Court' in the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg. They are described and explored in a recent publication in some depth by the landscape historian David Jacques and the Hermitage Museum's curator of drawings Mikhail Dedinkin – the latter suggesting that Empress Catherine – a passionate enthusiast for the English style of gardening and landscape design – purchased the albums with a view to informing her own landscape improvements, and that they project Hampton Court at the height of its picturesque perfection.³

The albums contain 150 views from the late 1770s, one hundred of which pertain to Hampton Court and neighbouring Bushy Park (*figs. 66 & 67*). They are naïve in character and incorporate some obvious distortions (described below), but being the product of a topographical artist they presumably offer fairly reliable representations of the gardens and buildings. Rather unusually, they document almost every quarter of the palace grounds from the humblest 'inferior' courtyard to the lofty Long Water Avenue.⁴ The drawings comprise one of the most comprehensive topographical surveys of an English designed landscape prior to Jean Claude Nattes' record of Stowe from the early 1800s – and they are certainly the most authoritative contemporary record of a landscape in which Brown had a sustained input in its presentation and management. Spyers' views are also unusual in as much as they do not attempt to idealise their subject matter: they document with splendid clarity the mundane and the everyday and supply an apparently unedited view of some of the more unflattering aspects of the palace – and of gardens that only a generation earlier had ranked among Britain's grandest and most influential pleasure grounds.

It remains unclear why John Spyers (c.1731-98) produced such an extensive topographical record of the royal gardens. He was the scion of the nurserymen Christopher Spyers (d.1737) who hailed from Twickenham and Isleworth. His uncles, too – Joshua (d.1768) and Thomas (d.1772) – were involved in the family trade. We know little about their activities, except that they appear to have been reasonably successful in their endeavours. Christopher supplied Frederick, Prince of Wales and Augusta, Princess Dowager of Wales with trees and shrubs for the gardens of Carlton House in St James's from 1734, and Joshua is believed to have provided Horace Walpole with trees at Strawberry Hill in 1748.

2. Quoted in Jane Brown, *The Omnipotent Magician: Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, 1716-1783* (2011), p. 222.

3. Mikhail Dedinkin, David Jacques and Mikhail Piotrovsky, *The Hampton Court Albums of Catherine the Great: Containing drawings, mainly of the palace and its surrounds, by Capability Brown's draughtsman and surveyor, John Spyers, purchased by Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia* (London: Fontanka, 2016).

4. There are a few notable exceptions, including Pond Yards south of the palace – among the oldest gardens at the palace, containing the orangery, the sunken gardens and the vine house.

John Spyers entered Brown's service as a surveyor and draughtsman in the 1760s and appears to have had an especial interest in topographical drawing. Indeed, he seems to have spent most of his time producing watercolours for the purposes of illustrating the proposed effects of Brown's landscape improvements, as Brown himself is reputed by John Claudius Loudon to have been a poor artist.⁵ The drawings in the Hermitage albums, however, were almost certainly not produced for Brown: they appear to be studies, possibly carried out with a view to improving his skill as an artist. It was serendipitous that they ended up in the hands of Catherine the Great. Spyers appears to have conceived of the idea of bundling up and selling some of his drawings to the Russian Empress in 1783, shortly after the death of Brown. He sent the albums to his acquaintance the Scotsman James Meader, who was at the time a gardener in the service of the Russian Empress at Tsarskoe Selo, near St Petersburg, and who brokered the deal.⁶ Quite remarkably, Meader succeeded in selling them for the then exorbitant sum of 1,000 roubles, remarking at the time that the price was high, 'more than they are worth tho' Mr Spyers valued them at more'. One does not know what the Empress made of her new acquisition. It would be reasonable to assume that she must have been surprised or possibly disappointed to discover that the drawings portrayed a once great garden in picturesque decline.

As the Brown Advisor remarks, the drawings beg some interesting questions: 'a) what was Spyers trying to show in these pictures? - they are hardly a recommendation of the English style of its master and Spyers' long-time employer, Brown... b) where is the theatrical planting of shrubs, arranged in rows by height? c) where are the hay-makers that we see in his water-colours of Fisherwick? what was going on in the parkland? d) why are we always told that Brown let the old topiary plants go, when he obviously didn't? e) why is

it all so neglected? f) where are all the flowers? g) did Brown design the landscaping around the Cascade in Bushy Park?'

He offers some of his own conclusions, suggesting, for instance, that the clipped yew topiaries in the Privy Garden and the East Front Garden may have been 'shredded' (grown up and shaved into impossibly spindly things) in a 'Mannerist fashion' to leave room for shrubs underneath. Here the Advisor concedes that amidst Brown's apparent neglect there were also displays of innovation. I would in fact go so far as to say that in several places Brown made imaginative contributions to the palace grounds. Spyers depicts the Privy Garden as trim but startlingly vertical in its development: four ranks of etiolated yew and holly sentinels surge skywards, their distended forms dwarfing the early eighteenth-century geometrical parterres at their feet. The shapes of these trees are clearly not the result of a mere lack of maintenance, but appear to be the result of some bold, purposeful, inventively whimsical planning on Brown's part. The whole looks like some vast ruined classical temple - the trees resembling relic specimens of antiquity; what were formerly lines of dwarf topiary have evolved into a living gallery of aged trees. The carved marble deities also conspire to complete the illusion of the ruined temple. Spyers' distorted perspective, reducing the statues, and the 'blackamore' and the Indian slave sundials in particular, to the puniest of garden ornaments, emphasises the impressive effect of bizarre topiary on such a gargantuan scale. His view suggests that Brown may have incorporated new ideas in the garden: a sense of value of accumulated years of growth and vigour derived from a continuous tradition of cultivation. Whereas previous monarchs had repeatedly torn up the gardens of their predecessors and redesigned them, George III's royal gardener seems to have developed a slightly different approach: the earlier concern with splendour and pageantry was displaced by a respect for historical, if somewhat playful continuity. Such themes continue to play a central part in the perception of the gardens to this day.

5. John Claudius Loudon, *Encyclopaedia of Gardening* (1822), p.73.

6. Anthony Cross, *By the Banks of the Neva* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.276.

Elsewhere, the topiary was also subject to the same treatment. Spyers' watercolour of the middle of the Great Fountain Garden depicts the large late seventeenth-century oval basin and its fountain as a forlorn puddle pierced by a puny squirt; the pool is no longer encompassed by an ordered company of pert carefully clipped yew sentinels, but by an undisciplined mob of monstrous shapes, or as Thomas Jefferson, who visited the palace gardens in 1786, remarked: 'Old fashioned. Clipt yews grown wild'; sugar cones, pyramidal hats and gargantuan mushrooms sprout like rank weeds from the relict flower beds from the early formal gardens. The effect is startling and unconventional.

The drawings also illustrate some ingenious mid-eighteenth-century landscape innovations. A few views, for example, suggest that the regular tree planting of the great Baroque avenues was interrupted occasionally to create clearings to allow for diagonal views across the park. His 'View over the Canal (towards the Stud)' and 'A View over the Canal (towards Esher)' show how clearings appear to have been made in the Long Water Avenue to frame views to an eye-catching building and the Surrey Hills. The same is true in the Ditton Avenue, where trees appear to have been removed to frame a view from the gardens to the Bowling Green Pavilions on the edge of the Thames.⁸ It is tempting to credit Brown with these improvements - especially as he is known to have carried out similar ones at Trentham in Staffordshire. This theatrical conceit was not, however, one of Brown's own invention: Alexander Pope describes having seen similar devices earlier in the century at Cirencester Park.⁹

Spyers' attention to detail makes his drawings especially and unusually informative. Some, for example, throw light on the informal domestic-scale gardens created in some of the palace's 'inferior' courts: Master

Carpenter's Court is portrayed as possessing small ad hoc gardens - one encompassed by a painted picket fence. One could hardly, in the absence of his drawings, have imagined such alluring domestic arrangements in the palace precincts. And what we now know as an emphatically stony Clock Court is depicted as possessing a sprinkling of shrubs emerging from the pavements. Perhaps most interesting of all, two views show billowing foliage through the clerestory panes of the old Tennis Courts, suggesting that the building was possibly used to store or over-winter plants - probably stray exotics displaced from the then dwindling collection in the Lower Orangery. The courts were not in use, and were conveniently located close to the Wilderness - a large seventeenth-century garden the gates of which were padlocked by Brown to contain his flock of turkeys.¹⁰

In summary, *The Hermitage Albums* supply us with a rare view of a great royal garden in decline. That Spyers was an astute and objective observer and recorder of his surroundings makes his legacy all the more intriguing; and what renders his record even more intriguing is the fact that it provides us with a window into Hampton Court during a period which was hitherto almost entirely unrecorded. That it in part reflects badly on Brown's stewardship of the royal landscape should not diminish our regard for this leviathan of eighteenth-century landscape gardening - rather it rounds out his character, and portrays him in an entirely new and engagingly human light.

It is in fact curious that Brown was installed at Hampton Court: it was, from 1737, after the Court had ceased to meet there, a remote royal backwater (about fifteen miles from central London), the lion's share of which was given over to Grace and Favour inhabitants - a tribe of inmates so singular as to be described in the mid-nineteenth century

7. H. A. Washington, ed., *The writings of Thomas Jefferson: being his autobiography, correspondence, reports, messages, addresses, and other writings, official and private* (1854), vol. IX, p.368.

8. Album 1, no.7645, 'A View of the Pavilions taken in Hampton Court Park', and no. 7646, 'A View of the Pavilions taken in Hampton Court Garden'.

9. William Warburton, ed., Letter to Lady Mary Worley Montagu, 15 September 1721, *The Works of Alexander Pope, Esq. in nine volumes* (1797), vol. 8, p.402.

10. William Chambers reported in 1774 that 'Master Brown had put padlocks on the wilderness at Hampton Court where he breeds turkeys'. (British Library, Ad.MSS, 41135, f39, Sir William Chambers to Thomas Worsley, 13 September 1774).



67. John Spyers, *Cascade, Busby Park*, pencil and watercolour wash, late 1770s
(PRIVATE COLLECTION)

by Dickens in *Little Dorrit* as 'encamped there like a sort of civilized gypsies'.¹¹ The fifty-seven acres of gardens were unmodernised, and the sums provided for their maintenance were inadequate to effect major landscape changes. Brown, moreover, was appointed by George III to maintain the gardens, and not to improve them. Indeed, it is reputed that when solicited by the King to improve the gardens, Brown 'declined the hopeless task, out of respect to himself and his profession'.¹²

Why then was Brown – 'the most eminent man of his day', who by 'his taste and management, and the great celebrity he obtained...realized a good fortune' – appointed to maintain the gardens at Hampton Court?¹³ It was not, as we might now imagine, a prestigious sinecure, although it was reasonably well paid. Brown may simply have found it convenient to live and work at Hampton Court. He would presumably have found the palace grounds a congenial place from which to operate his business: it was large and spacious and at a comfortable distance from Central London, it had a substantial garden infrastructure, its riverside location made it easily accessible, and it had a wealth of diverse spaces suitable for growing a wide range of plants. Hampton Court may also have appealed to him because it was a great landscape that he saw no need to reconfigure or improve.¹⁴ Perhaps Brown was in this instance an opportunist? Perhaps he realised that at Hampton Court he could live in palatial surroundings with few responsibilities and with limited interference from his royal overlords? He was evidently very comfortable at Wilderness House – his official lodgings in the palace gardens – as he even added a ballroom to the house.

The most puzzling issue raised by Spyers' drawings is that although they corroborate the veracity of Robinson's complaint, Brown was permitted to remain at Hampton Court until his death. There were no further official grievances, Brown was neither reprimanded nor dismissed, nor does it appear that he made any efforts to reform his ways. He carried on living a very comfortable life in the lee of Henry VIII's great palace until his death in 1783. The gardens evolved neither in grandeur nor in ruin, but in gentle and piecemeal decay.

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F I N I S

11. Works of Charles Dickens: *Little Dorrit* (1869; first published in serial form between 1855 and 1857), pp.153-4.

12. 'No. XIII. Humphry Repton Esq. Architect and Landscape Gardener', *The Annual biography and obituary for the year 1819* (1819), vol. III, p.288.

13. Clarke, *The Georgian Era: Memoirs of the most eminent persons, who have flourished in Great Britain, from the accession of George the First to George to the demise of George the Fourth, in four volumes* (1834), vol. IV, p.471.

14. He did not, for instance, wish to impose himself on the landscape of Wrest Park. See The Brown Advisor: 205, 'Was Brown a man of mystery?', 21 March 2016. Brown remarked to Amanda Polwarth in 1778 that he did not wish to make major changes to Wrest Park as they 'might unravel the Mystery of the Gardens'.