

An Investigation of the Design and Evolution of the Rothley Lakes Landscape, Wallington, Northumberland

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SUMMARY

The tercentenary of the birth of Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown was in 2016. To help mark the anniversary, archaeological desk-based research, survey and excavations were carried out at Rothley High Lake on the Wallington estate in Northumberland. The estate has close associations with Brown, who was born at nearby Kirkharle. The project examined the nature of the neglected designed landscape at the lake and helped to untangle the story behind the creation of the designed landscape around the High Lake. Even though Brown is known to have designed the adjacent Low Lake, no direct involvement with Brown was found at the High Lake, despite the lake’s ‘Brownian’ style. Even so, Rothley High Lake and its environs was part of an appreciation of landscape based on movement and experiencing scenery from both land and water.

INTRODUCTION

AS PART OF THE CELEBRATION of the 2016 tercentenary of Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown’s birth, the National Trust, commissioned a project to investigate the development of the designed landscape of Rothley Lakes, Wallington, Northumberland. Brown was known to be the designer of the Low Lake, but the origins and development of the High Lake and its surroundings is less well understood, despite previous documentary work (Debois 1999; 2011). Rothley Lakes were part of the Wallington Hall estate, now a National Trust property, which lies within the modern civil parish of Wallington Demesne, in Northumberland (NGR NZ 02771 84268). Rothley Lakes, which formed part of the original estate, lie around 6 km north east in the modern civil parish of Rothley on the Estate’s far eastern boundary (fig. 1). Wallington Hall is a grade I listed building and it is surrounded by a designed landscape park and garden registered as grade II* by Historic England. Rothley Lakes, alongside Rothley Park, an 18th century deer park around 1.8 km to the south of the lakes, are designed landscapes but neither are included on the Register of Parks and Gardens. There are two lakes at Rothley separated by a causeway on a watershed: the High Lake drains westwards, the Low Lake drains eastward. Only the High Lake is in National Trust ownership.

The present-day landscape around Rothley Lakes is characterised by upland heather and grass moorland with large geometric blocks of conifer plantation. Land use is predominantly enclosed permanent pasture, and historic sheep folds within the enclosed land are indicative of a pastoral farming system dating back to at least the 18th century. To the south of the lakes are two follies: Codger Fort and Rothley Castle and both were inter-visible eye-catchers with the High Lake. The immediate environs of the High Lake are under-managed, mixed

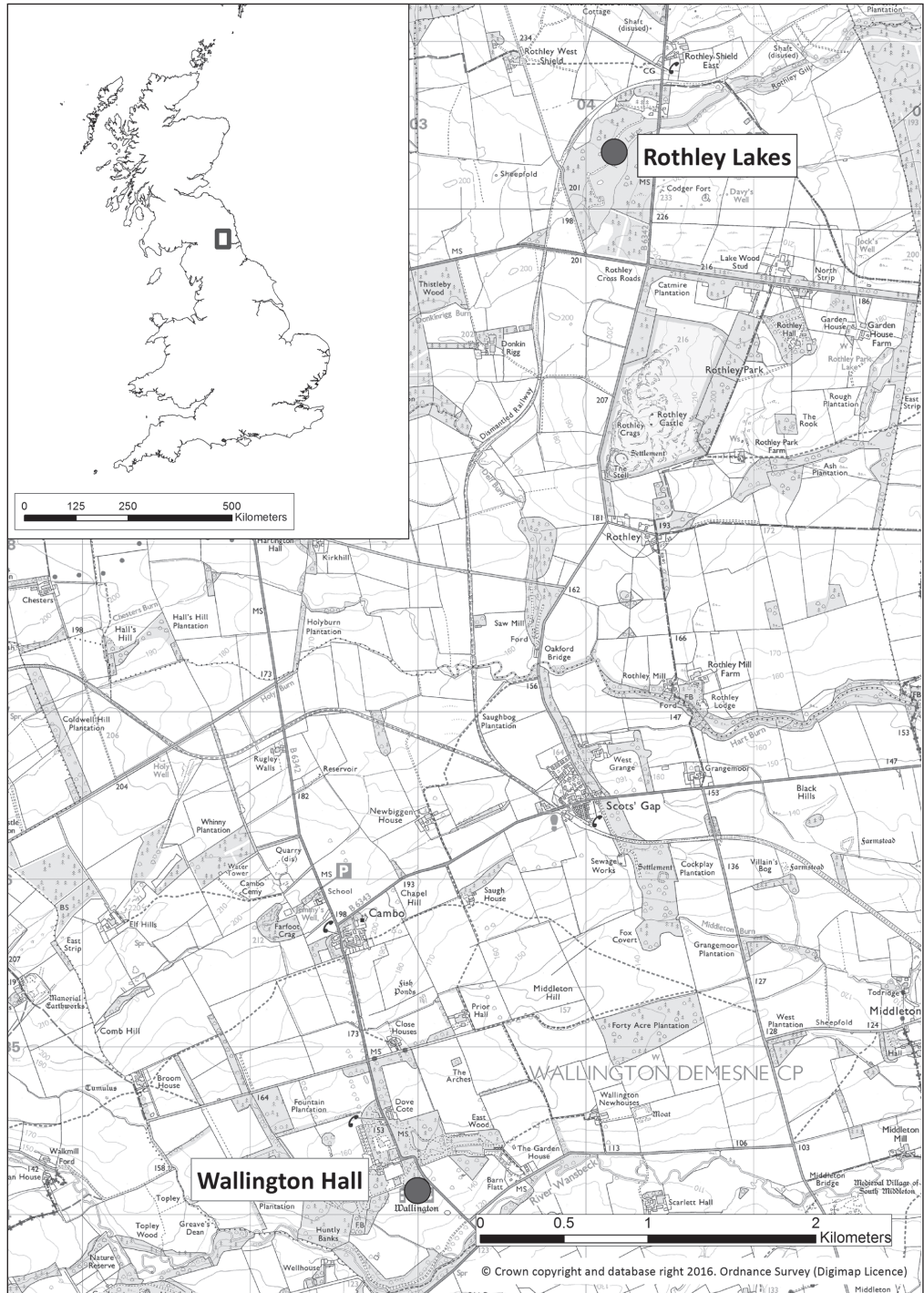


Fig. 1 Rothley Lakes and the Wallington Estate, Northumberland.

deciduous and coniferous woodland, with areas of overgrown, regenerated scrubby woodland where commercial forestry has been clear-felled.

The Rothley Lakes designed landscape originated in the later 18th century, when it consisted of the two serpentine lakes, lawns and surrounding ornamental woodland plantations. The two lakes have long been associated with Lancelot Brown. In the revised Pevsner guide, they are said to be, 'two fishing lakes created on either side of the road by Capability Brown in the 1760s' (Grundy *et al.* 1992, 556). In his list of Brown's landscape designs, Phibbs (2013, 273) states that there is 'no doubt that Brown designed at least one of Rothley Lakes'. This indicates that, whilst there is evidence for Brown's involvement in the design of one of the lakes, there is a strong suspicion that he also designed the other. In the recent review of Brown's landscapes, Wallington is associated with him by attribution only, but Rothley (erroneously located in Yorkshire) is said to have a definitive link to Brown (Gregory, Spooner and Williamson 2013, 67). Clearly, there is some uncertainty over the extent of Brown's involvement at Wallington and at Rothley Lakes in particular.

The National Trust has plans by Brown for the design of the Low Lake,¹ but the origins of the High Lake are less well-understood. The serpentine nature of the High Lake and its environs are indicative of the Brownian English Landscape Tradition, but there is no direct evidence for Brown's involvement in its creation (Newman and Newman 2016). Lancelot Brown knew the local landscape well because he grew up nearby at Kirkharle and went to school in the village of Cambo, on the Wallington Estate.

The National Trust wishes to manage Rothley High Lake environs in a manner appropriate to its historical character and significance. Moreover, the National Trust is concerned to make landscapes in their ownership available, stimulating and valued to a range of audiences. To aid the National Trust's decision making for its future management, research was required into the nature of the implemented 18th century design for Rothley High Lake (Newman and Newman 2016).

METHODS

The project was undertaken over three seasons, between 2013 and 2015. It comprised three strands:

- historical research building upon previous work by Debois Landscape Survey Group (1999/2011);
- topographical survey and landscape assessment;
- limited archaeological excavation.

The historical research focused on plans, elevations and cartographic evidence held in the archives and on display at Wallington Hall. The landscape assessment and survey set out to identify previously unrecorded landscape features and to elucidate the origins and nature of the woodland planting. The archaeological excavation comprised four trenches in woodland to the north of the lake, three to explore the structure and character of a serpentine path and one to examine a linear earthwork which appeared to equate with the boundary of an 18th-century woodland plantation, marking the edge of the designed landscape at Rothley (fig. 2).

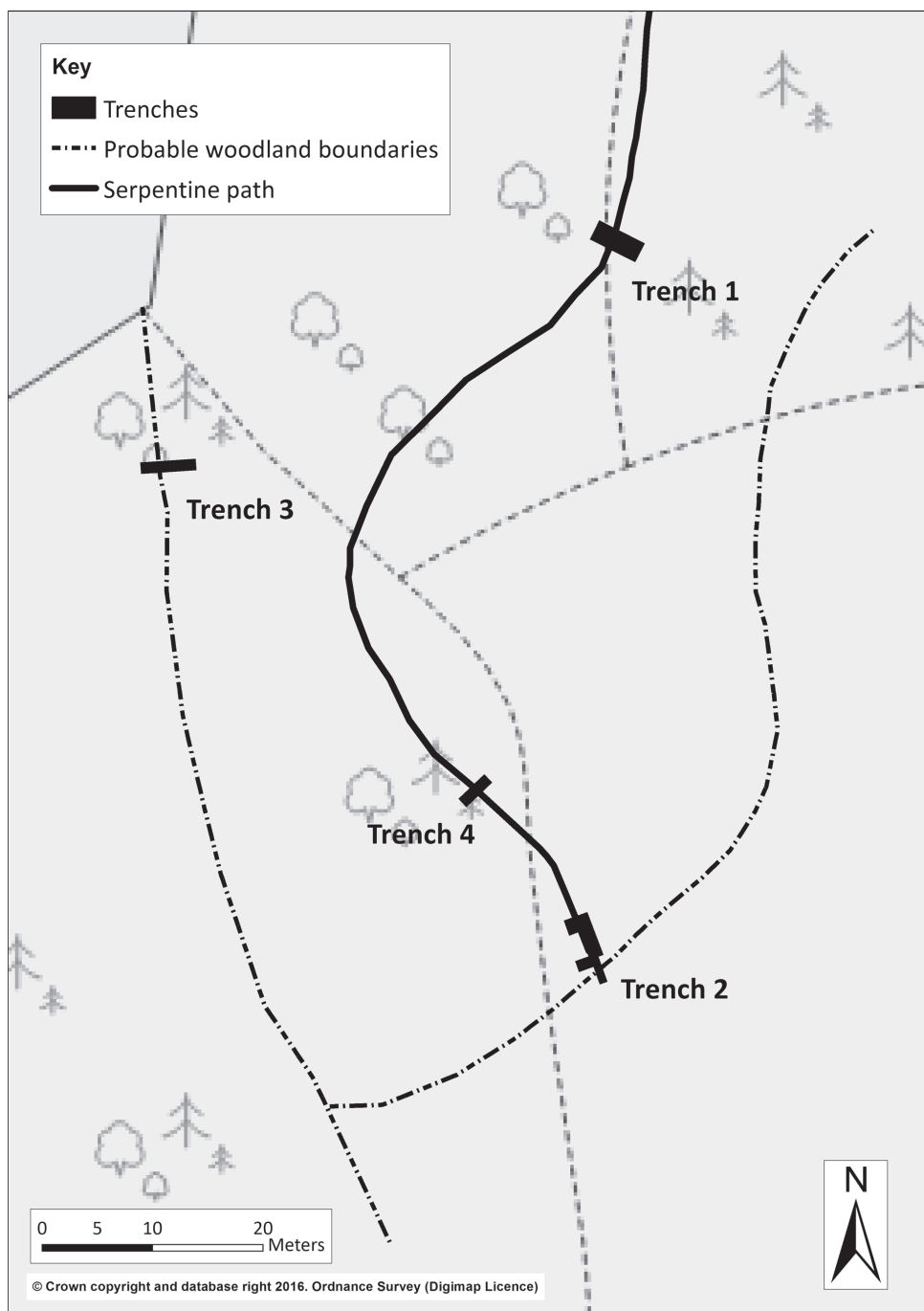


Fig. 2 Location of excavation trenches and surveyed earthwork features. The trenches were sited to answer specific questions about the form of the plantation boundary and serpentine path.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE WALLINGTON ESTATE AND ROTHLEY LAKES

The Estate in the 18th Century

The Wallington estate, and the precursor to the hall, was sold to the Blackett family in 1684. In 1728 it was inherited by Elizabeth Ord, who married Walter Calverley in 1729, and who adopted the name Blackett. From the 1730 to the 1770s Walter Blackett remodelled the house with an ornamental park and gardens, carried out extensive agricultural improvements, made new plantations across the estate, and commissioned the building of the deer park at Rothley Park as well as the new lakes at Rothley. Blackett's fortune partly came from industrial enterprises, including local collieries across the estate (Historic England 2015). As part of Blackett's improvements, he commissioned designs for buildings and structures from several architects, only some of which were implemented. James Paine, for example, designed the monumental bridge over the River Wansbeck, which still carries the public highway to Wallington Hall. Daniel Garret, who remodelled the Hall, also designed Rothley Castle, in Rothley Park. This folly was an eye-catcher, which also provided extensive views across the estate, and would have served to showcase Blackett's improvements. Thomas Wright designed the eye-catcher of Codger Fort in 1769, which overlooks Rothley Lakes (Debois 2011).

Following the death of Sir Walter in 1777, the estate passed to his nephew, Sir John Trevelyan, whose main seat was at Nettlecombe in Somerset (Historic England 2015). The survey plan of this date, which is likely to have been carried out following the change of ownership, shows the changes made by Sir Walter. Although improvement works to the estate land and buildings did not cease with the change of ownership, there was a clear change of direction, with more emphasis on production through agriculture and industry (Debois 2011, 11–12). The estate remained in the hands of the Trevelyan family until 1941 when Sir Charles Trevelyan gifted it to the National Trust.

Design and Origins of Rothley Lakes

The exact date of the creation of the designed landscape at Rothley Lakes is unknown. Until the second quarter of the eighteenth century, the area around Rothley Lakes was mainly unenclosed upland, divided between the settlements of Greenleighton and Rothley (Debois 2011, 194–5). Successive estate survey maps dating to 1728, 1742 and 1777² reveal how the improvements instigated by Sir Walter Blackett transformed the area, which was gradually enclosed and improved into an agrarian landscape characterised by regular, straight enclosure boundaries. By 1777, the lakes and surrounding designed landscape had been created. The two lakes, labelled 'The Lake' and 'Low Lake' were complete in their present form,³ surrounded by plantations. The 1777 survey depicts the estate landscape traversed by straight routes, both public roads, and private rides and drives, improving access across the estate (fig. 3).

'A sketch for Rothley Shield'⁴ is the earliest known design proposal for what became Rothley High Lake (fig. 4). Considered by the National Trust to date to around 1751, it certainly pre-dated the opening of the Hexham to Alnmouth turnpike road in 1753–4 (Northumberland County Council 2009, 27). The plan depicts a building in the centre of a lawn on the north side of a serpentine lake with a perimeter woodland belt forming the backdrop. The



Fig. 3 Detail of Rothley Lakes, taken from the map of the Wallington estate, 1777 (NT WAL/D/7). The High Lake is marked as 'The Lake' on the west side of the road.

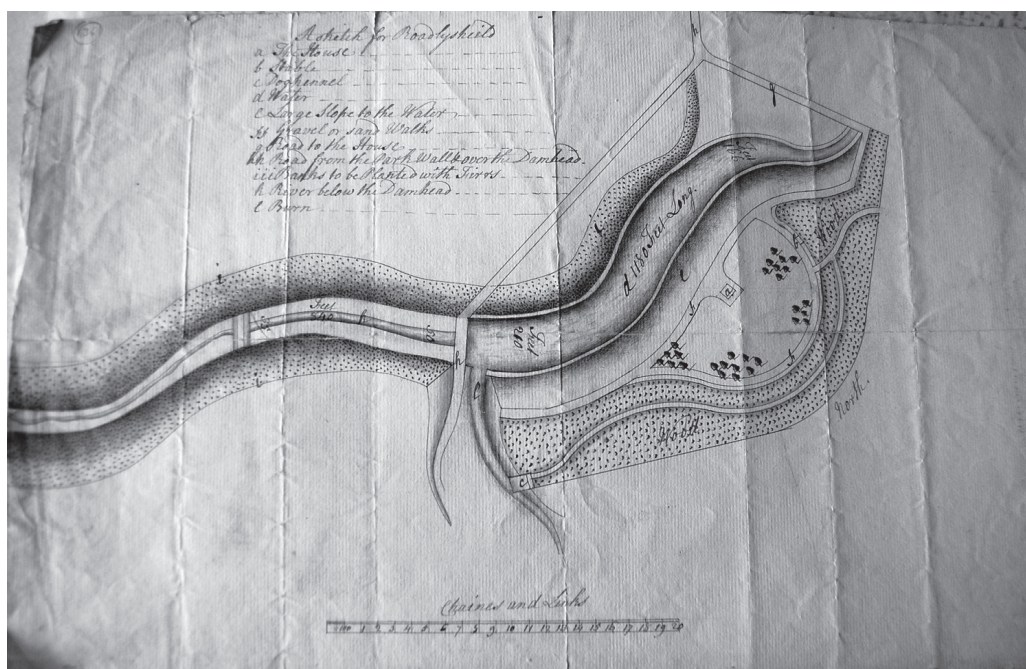


Fig. 4 The earliest design plan for a lake at Rothley c. 1751 (NT WAL/D/194).



Fig. 5 The implemented design plan for the High Lake (NT WAL/Plan/8). Although it has similarities with the earlier plan, with a building set on a lawn above the lake, this design is less formal.

design is formal, with a semi-circular area of lawn defined by sand or gravel walks connecting the building to the road. The intended building was a small structure, perhaps a summer or banqueting house. Small copses of deciduous trees are shown scattered about the edges of the lawn, behind the building. A path or drive is shown leading through the belt of plantation woodland to a dog kennel on the eastern edge of the woodland belt. The aspect from the building across the lake was intended to be open to a belt of firs bounding the southern bank of the lake. The author is unknown, however, it is very similar in style to the plan for the China Pond of 1750.⁵ A comparison of both the writing and drawing styles suggests the same hand.

The second plan⁶ is undated and anonymous but shows the turnpike road as built so is likely to post-date 1753–4 (fig. 5). As the plan is a design for the High Lake it must pre-date 1767 when the High Lake is first documented as existing (Debois 2011, 195). Thomas Wright has been suggested as the designer (2011, 195) but a close examination of the original plan shows that the drawing style and writing are not Thomas Wright's. Indeed, it has not been

possible to match the writing and drawing style of this plan with any of the known contributors to landscape designs and buildings for the Wallington estate at this period. Other designs by William Newton, J. Strickland and George Brown (Lancelot's brother) all differ sufficiently in style and handwriting to exclude them as authors of this plan. There is no direct evidence for the plan having been drawn by Lancelot Brown, as it is not drawn in his style. The possibility remains, however, that it may have been drawn by one of his known collaborators in the 1750s and 1760s, such as William Donn, Thomas White or Jonathan Spyers (Brown 2011, 164; Brown and Williamson 2016). Comparing the unattributed plan to drawings by these men would be a useful avenue of further research.

The unattributed plan appears to have been the scheme implemented as it fits the existing landscape quite closely (Newman and Newman 2016). The northern and southern banks of the lake and the external boundary of the perimeter woodland belt, for example, follow the modern boundaries. The plan has a detailed description for the creation of the lake and the woodland plantation:

The plantation Contains 3 acres, 2 Rood[s] and 20 pole. Trinching at one Shilling per Rod, will cost about 18 pound and will require about 700 trees to plant it, at least 15 feet distance. 132 Rod, in the fence at [?] 6 pence per Rod, is nine pound eighteen shilling. There will be about eleven acres and a half of water. The inclosure, between the wood and water, contains three acres, and near a quarter. The water will flow up the Creek to the ford, and a boat-house may be made, at the east end, of the plantation; whose roof, need not be, above the surface, of the ground. The dotted lines shows the old dikes, except those between the water mark; which shows the flat, between the hills. The double lines, shows the roads.

As with the plan of *c.* 1751, the design shows a large open area of lawn on the north bank of the lake, with a building in the centre opposite the top of the lake's curve, which would have provided a pleasing view across the water to Codger Crag and Rothley Park. The single woodland plantation comprises a wide belt of deciduous trees on the northern boundary of the designed landscape, with a serpentine path running its whole length from east to west. The east end of the path terminates at an inlet on the small creek where a proposed boathouse is shown. The creek, as stated in the description, would have been widened by the flow of water up from the newly formed lake. An existing road, which crossed the creek by means of a ford, runs along the northern boundary of the woodland. A second, shorter, serpentine path runs north to south across the longer woodland path, probably providing access from the road onto the open lawn and house.

One of the main differences between the plan and the design that was implemented is at the western end of the lake, where the plan shows the lake terminating in three arms, each with a dam. The lake as built terminates in two arms, covering a larger area than originally intended. The area of the planned three arms is contained within the large northern arm, terminating in an earth and stone dam, with a small island just offshore. If the lake as built is a modification of the original design, then the island may have originated as one of the inlets between two of the dams. The southern arm as built is not part of the original design, but also terminates in an earth and stone dam with a spillway in its north-west corner. The plan states that the lake was to cover about 11 and a half acres of water, though when measured against modern maps, the lake design would have covered just over 13 statutory acres. As built, the lake now measures just over 18 acres, and this corroborates with the measurement given in the survey of 1777 as 18 acres, 3 roods and 29 perches.⁷



Fig. 6 The design plan for Rothley High Lake (NT WAL/Plan/8) overlain with surveyed earthwork features. This shows the surveyed woodland ditches in relation to the boundaries of the perimeter woodland belt and the differences between the line of the serpentine path as planned and as implemented. The location of the tent is an approximation.

The design of the serpentine path also varies considerably from the path as surveyed and excavated (fig. 6). The original path was designed to run the entire length of the plantation woodland, following the curve of the woodland but also meandering. Its eastern end led to a boathouse built on the inlet created from the small stream on the north shore of the lake. The design shows the path crossed by a shorter serpentine path, running north to south and

which was almost certainly intended to provide access from the road to the north onto the lawned area. As built, the path does not run through the entire length of the wood. It terminates where it meets the north-south path, turning north.

The plan shows an extensive lawned area, with a structure half way between the woodland plantation and the lake. At the bottom of the plan are designs for two buildings (fig. 5). Although not stated explicitly, these were clearly intended to be designs for the building shown in the centre of the lawned area. Both buildings, probably summer houses, are shown as two storeys in height with steps up to a surrounding verandah. One is a neo-classical design in brick with stone dressings, with a pedimented roof over a large Venetian window at first floor level. The second, also shown in plan-view as a square structure with flights of steps to the rear, is a brick structure more Gothick in design. The eclectic design features a tented roof, slightly concave in profile, culminating in a weather vane. The elevations have a decorated brick façade with a contrasting diamond pattern. A plain rose window is shown on the first floor, directly above the doorway. In one corner of the plan is a small sketch of Rothley Castle in Rothley Park, drawn in such a way as to reflect its position as seen from the building. The clear intention of the landscape design at Rothley Lake was to provide scenic views southwards towards Rothley Park and the eye-catching folly of Rothley Castle.

The designs for a building on the lawn above the High Lake do not seem to have been realised, though a temporary structure on the lawn is recorded, in the form of a tent. Both lakes had been constructed by the time the tent is first referenced (Hutchinson 1778, 224). Although the exact location of the tent is not given, the description suggests a position on the High Lake, 'a curvated canal ... margined with young plantations' (1778, 224). The Wallington Hall archives contains a late 18th-century design for a building, on the rear of which is the phrase 'Intended building of stone, where the upper Tent used to stand, at the Upper Lake'.⁸ The elevation shows a plain, single-storeyed building of classical design, with a small pediment over a Venetian window. There is no documentary evidence to suggest that this structure was ever built. Moreover, there were no surface indications of a building in the approximate location of the intended structure, though the area has been heavily disturbed by forestry activities (fig. 6).

The Woodland Plantation

The plantation proposed in the implemented plan can still be clearly defined within the modern, more widespread woodland. The original planting was in the form of a crescent-shaped perimeter belt framing the lawn on the north shore of the lake, and survives as an area of veteran beech trees, interspersed with some oak, an occasional hornbeam and, at the eastern end, some veteran Scots Pines. The beeches provide a distinctive woodland character, as the dense canopy shades out most of the undergrowth resulting in well-shaded and mossy ground, scattered with moss-covered stones in the western half of the woods. It is in this area where the serpentine path runs, and the mossy, rock-strewn ground would have provided a romantic atmosphere to the visitor walking along the slightly sunken, meandering path. It is unlikely that the area had this character in the later 18th century, however, when the plantations were young. The eastern half of the woodland is slightly more open, though still with little undergrowth under the beech canopy, giving the impression of wide walkways leading towards the boat house.



Fig. 7 Beech trees in the plantation belt. The multiple stems indicate that they were originally planted as bundles.

The intended nature of the original woodland planting has been a matter of some discussion. It has been suggested that it was managed as a coppice because many of the veteran trees today have multiple stems (Debois 1999; 2011). The stems do not originate from a coppice stool, however. Moreover, there is no reference to coppice wood in any of the contemporary, or near contemporary, sources which mention Rothley Lakes and when the woodland is referenced it is usually as ‘plantations’ (Hutchinson 1778; 224; Young, 1769, 524). Eighteenth-century commentators generally made the distinction between coppice and plantation quite deliberately.

The original plantation is dominated by beech, a tree that was not favoured for management as coppice, but was favoured as an ornamental timber tree in the 18th century. The beeches do have multi stems that to a degree mimic grown-out former coppice, but no stools are discernible (fig. 7). The multi-stemmed beeches can be explained by bundle planting. This is a process in which two or more seedlings are planted close together so that, ‘as they grow the individuals become very closely pressed together. Some single boles show natural fluting and convolutions and it is rarely possible in single species groupings to be confident of their origin by visual inspection’ (Read 2000, 20). The beech trees at Rothley show characteristics that indicate bundle planting, mostly as single species, but with one or two examples of beech matched with Scots Pine. They may have been bundled to provide support for each other as they grew in the thin and rather waterlogged soils. Bundling for protection may have been especially necessary at Rothley, where beeches in the 18th century would have been an introduced non-native exotic growing in a challenging environment towards the northern limits of their climatic tolerance. Bundles were a technique used by landscape designers to more quickly provide a wide-spreading crown (2000, 20).

The area around both lakes are described in early 19th-century sources as ‘shrubs’ or ‘shrubberies’ (Debois 1999, Appendix G, section 3). In *The Beauties of England and Wales* (Hodgson and Laird 1813, 181), the lakes are described as ‘two fine sheets of water, hemmed with shrubberies’, and in *A History of Northumberland* (Hodgson 1823, 306) it says, ‘shrubs

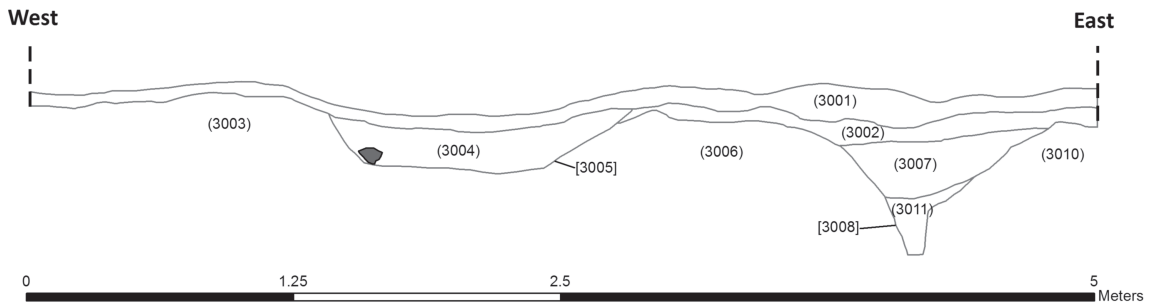
were planted by the walks around this sheet, and some of them still remain among the tall grasses, rushes and carexes that have sprung up naturally among them'. Both descriptions refer to planting around the lake itself, rather than to the woodland which was set back. At least on the northern lake shore, this may have been a later addition to the landscape, perhaps planted at the same time as the deep plantations of larch and pine also described in Hodgson's *History* (1823, 306). The shrubberies along the north shore were probably made after Blackett's death, and after the estate survey which followed, as the plan of 1778 shows the original planting scheme set back on the north side of the lake.⁹

The boundaries of the original perimeter woodland belt can be traced on the ground in the form of earthwork features (fig. 2). The northern edge of the plantation is marked by a boundary bank, now surmounted with a modern fence, separating it from the pasture to the north. This bank matches the boundary as shown on the design plan.¹⁰ At the south-western end of the boundary bank, the line continues as a shallow depression, suggesting a boundary ditch. The line of the earthwork was surveyed, although in places it was difficult to follow because of modern ground disturbance, a build-up of leaf litter and waterlogging. To test the assumption that this was indeed the boundary to the plantation woodland, a trench was excavated across it (Trench 3 in fig. 2).

Two seemingly parallel linear cut features were revealed in the excavation trench. The feature forming the visible surface depression was revealed to be of likely recent origin, but there was an earlier likely boundary feature found to its east which was largely invisible at the present-day surface. The earlier feature was cut into the natural brownish-yellow clay ground surface 0.52 m in depth, in the form of a wide flaring 'U' shaped ditch, 1 m wide at its top, with a slot in the base. The slot was straight-sided on the east with an angled side on the west, about 0.2 m deep and only 0.08 m wide at its base (fig. 8 and fig. 9). The ditch and slot suggests that this was a palisade trench dug with a spade probably to enclose the woodland area planted in the later 18th century. The slot would have taken posts for paling, leaving a scarp slope in front of a wooden fence to the west (outside) and a shallower slope to the east (inside). The slot in the base contained some large stones, indicating post packing. This ditch and fence probably both defined the plantation area and formed a barrier to exclude animals from feeding on the young spring as the plantation was established. The later ditch appears to be nothing more than an open drain which rapidly filled in and, is perhaps no earlier in date than very late 19th century.

The Serpentine Path

The path is one of the key features of the designed landscape, surviving as a shallow earthwork depression lined with stones in places. Its line was surveyed and three sections excavated across it to understand its character and extent (Trenches 1, 2 and 4 on fig. 2). The survey revealed that the path as built appears to have been amended from the original plan.¹¹ Whereas the 18th-century plan shows the path meandering along the entire length of the woodland, ending at the edge of the plantation at both ends, the completed path was much shorter (fig. 6). No trace of the path could be found beyond the intersection with the shorter north-south path, which connected the access road to the lawn. This shorter path was observed as a shallow depression, though it was difficult to follow south beyond the intersection of two paths mainly because of ground disturbance. Some edging stones were observed at the intersection and appeared to indicate that the serpentine path turned north onto the



Key

- Section edge
- Stones

Fig. 8 Section of Trench 3, excavated across the modern drain and woodland plantation boundary.



Fig. 9 Excavated section through the outer boundary to the perimeter woodland belt. A V-shaped ditch with a narrow slot in the base, probably to take a timber palisade.



Fig. 10 The serpentine path, as excavated. The sides of the path were lined with stones set on top of a small clay bund (here surviving on one side only). The path surface appears to have been formed by natural clay and a narrow drain was cut into it to aid water run-off.

north-south path. Although overgrown with saplings and undergrowth, the north-south path could be traced to the northern edge of the plantation and to a gap in the woodland bank which separates Rothley Lakes from the grazing land beyond.

The design on the original plan suggests that visitors would have arrived by carriage from a drive on the north side of the woodland. The drive no longer exists as a route, but has been observed below turf as a paved road (personal communication The National Trust). It can also be seen in places as a slight earthwork. The road led to an entrance into the wood and a short path that would have provided access into the designed landscape, and allowed the visitor to go straight on to the lawned area, turn right to follow the serpentine path to the edge of the woods, or to turn left to follow the path to the boat house. It is the option to have turned left which does not seem to have been built as a defined path. It is possible that the visitor was left to walk to the boat house through the widely-spaced beech trees which, even today, appear to create well-spaced, if informal paths.

Trenches were excavated across the path to determine its original appearance, how it was constructed and to help identify its southern end (Trenches 1, 2 and 4, fig. 2). The path varied in width between 1.4 m and 2 m, becoming wider towards its southern end. The edge was not always defined by alignments of piled stone but rather in some places just by a clay bund. The piled stones were set on top of the clay bund (fig. 10). It can be assumed that both the clay and the stones were derived from clearing the surface of the path and were set to the sides of

the path to define its edges. The stone piles may well have been arranged to look as naturalistic as possible.

No evidence was found for a path surface, other than the natural clay, and a drain was later cut into it to help drainage (fig. 10). Doubtless the exposed clay surface of the path would have rendered it difficult to use in wet conditions and a drain would have helped, however the lack of a gravel surface may indicate the path was not intended for frequent use. It seems likely that the period between the path being constructed and the drain being dug, the environment surrounding the path was not especially wooded, in that the soils that began to form on the edges of the path do not appear to have been derived from leaf litter. In contrast when the drain ceased to be cleared and maintained, the drain filled with leaf litter creating a humic soil, and it can be assumed that the woodland was mature when the path ceased to function. The drain worked by gravity as the height of the serpentine path fell by more than 2 m across a distance of nearly 56 m.

The lowest end of the serpentine path was identified where it reached the boundary of the woodland plantation (fig. 11). The view south from the plantation edge would have given a vista across the High Lake to Rothley Castle without any interference from tree cover. The path terminated in a revetted bank with a clay platform on top of it, which may have been deliberately constructed to elevate the viewer looking south towards the lake, providing an enhanced panorama at the end of the woodland walk (fig. 12). Similar 18th century kerbed paths terminating in viewing platforms have been archaeologically recorded elsewhere (Johnson and Campbell 2010, 91).

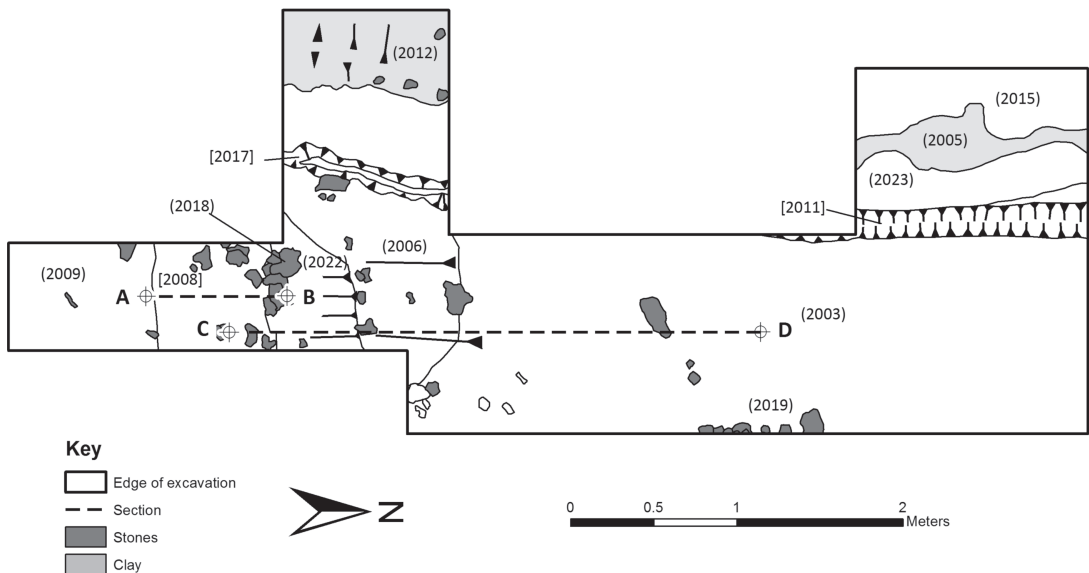


Fig. 11 Trench 2, showing the end of the serpentine path with the clay bund (shaded), the drain and the revetted clay bank at the southern end of the path.



Fig. 12 Excavated section through the clay platform and revetted bank at the south end of the serpentine path.

The Low Lake

The Low Lake was completed in its current form in 1771, broadly in line with Lancelot Brown's original design,¹² though it is clear that the planting scheme was never completed. Brown's other designs, for a 'bridge'¹³ to carry the road across the causeway, a boat house and round tower,¹⁴ and alternative plans for a house.¹⁵ The house is most likely the intended banqueting house shown on his plan of 1771.¹⁶

DISCUSSION

The Pre-Plantation Landscape

Before the late 1760s and the creation of High Lake, the landscape of the Rothley part of the Wallington estate was largely upland moor in character. Excavation indicated that there were differences in soil between the area that was planted as a perimeter woodland belt and the area to the immediate south, which became part of the lawn. The area that became woodland had thin upland soils, whereas the area to the south had a thicker, richer loam. This suggests that at least part of the area that became lawn may have been cultivated previously.

The Creation and Development of the Plantation and Serpentine Path

The excavations within the plantation did not recover any datable artefacts. Nevertheless, documentary evidence indicates that the plantation was established by 1767 (Debois 2011, 195). It was still described as a young plantation in 1778 (Hutchinson 1778, 224). The original plantation appears to have consisted largely of beech trees that were planted in bundles, to create the effect of a canopy more quickly than would have been possible with single trees. It seems the plantation was intended to become a heavily canopied woodland with little understorey. The aim would have been a shaded, mossy, rocky and thus picturesque and mysterious environment, at least at the western end of the wood. Perimeter belts of beech are a particular feature of Brown's landscape designs (Gregory, Spooner and Williamson 2011, 14).

The western end of the wood was chosen for the creation of the serpentine path, which would have taken a meandering route through this picturesque woodland landscape. The path was part of the original design and archaeological evidence suggests it was implemented before the wood matured. The path was very simple in construction, consisting of a clay base between two edges marked by loosely piled stones. The whole design would have been intended to appear as naturalistic as possible.

The Role of Lancelot Brown at Rothley Lakes

The involvement of Lancelot Brown in the creation of the Low Lake is well attested; his design plans survive and the construction of the lake is documented. An association with the High Lake has long been speculated. Whilst the landscape of the High Lake, including the plantation and probably the serpentine path, date to the late 1760s contemporary with many of Brown's designs elsewhere, there is no evidence for his involvement in their design. Even so, the serpentine character of the water body the curving, naturalistic and picturesque nature of the surrounding landscape features and the use of a perimeter woodland belt featuring beech, are part of the Brownian milieu of landscape design (Gregory, Spooner and Williamson 2011). Given Brown's local origins, including his brother George being estate surveyor at the time, it is possible that Brown was at least an inspiration for the High Lake landscape.

The Purpose of Rothley Lakes Designed Landscape

The High Lake landscape is characterised by sinuous features. S-shapes were considered to exemplify the line of beauty (Podolak and Kondolf 2016, 150). The two lakes at Rothley were intended to be perceived as one water body, part of an integral design consisting of an S-shape (2016 154), though both lakes individually are sinuous. An appreciation of these serpentine-style landscapes was attained by movement through them, for example on foot, by carriage or in a boat (Mayer 2015). This movement was contrived and constrained by the character of the available routes, which were designed to provide vistas and experiences that promoted the sensibilities of the landscape's owner.

Rothley Lakes landscape was part of the wider Wallington Estate designed landscape, but it was located at a considerable distance from the house. Consequently, it was intended to be experienced as part of a journey. Visiting the lakes was an event that began with a carriage or horse journey of nearly five miles, travelling through a farming landscape undergoing improvement. As the route climbed towards Rothley Lakes, there would have been evidence



Fig. 13 View across the High Lake, showing the serpentine nature of the design.

of the moors having been tamed and improved and, in the case of Rothley Park, put to productive use as a deer park. The route took the visitor to a causeway across the lakes, which naturally the visitor would want to cross. The intention was for the visitor to experience the High Lake and Low Lake as one body of water bisected by the road. On the far side, the visitor turned off the road to travel along the edge of the Rothley Lakes designed landscape, with woodland on the left and coal mines ahead and to the right. This would have enhanced the impression of an environment put to productive use and would have showcased Blackett's ability to exploit the economic potential of his estate. The whole impression would have been of a previously poorly productive waste being made more profitable, more productive and more beautiful. Landscape designers during the Enlightenment improved scenery within a setting of improved agricultural productivity; two complementary aspects conveying the same message about the landowner, his outlook and place in the world (see Finch 2014).

On reaching the northern edge of the plantation, the visitor would have proceeded on foot into the woods. There they were presented with choices. To the south, they could continue their journey through the woodland to the lawn and towards the upper tent, where they would have been afforded views across the lake to Rothley Castle and Codger Fort. The original intention here was to provide a permanent structure where visitors could rest, eat and enjoy the view, although the tent does not seem to have been succeeded by a building, as was repeatedly planned. Alternatively, the visitor could progress along the serpentine path, and experience the cool, damp and shaded woodland environment provided by the maturing

beech plantation. Having meandered through this picturesque experience, they would have emerged on the edge of the woodland, again to have an elevated view down the lake towards Rothley Castle and across to Codger Fort. Finally, they could have turned left from the entrance to walk through a more open woodland, towards a boat house. Here, they would be able to embark on a boat and journey onto the lake, where they could appreciate the designed landscape from the water. As well as boating as a pleasurable experience, boats were used for fishing, an activity that, like boating, grew in popularity in the 18th century. Fishing tackle was known to have been kept at Rothley along with a boat (Debois 1999, Appendix G). Experiencing views from water bodies was an important aspect of Picturesque aesthetics (Finch 2008, 522). Boat houses and interest in boating appear to have become more popular in the mid-18th century (Menuge 2010), at the same time as the development of the serpentine water bodies. It is unlikely to be coincidental that the popularity of boating increased at the same time as the development of sinuous water bodies. These features provided the same experience of emerging vistas as could be experienced on serpentine walks and drives.

In conclusion, there is no evidence for Brown's direct involvement with the design of Rothley High Lake. Even so, the High and Low Lakes appear to be part of an integrated design aesthetic and Brown was certainly responsible for the design of the Low Lake. The High Lake was clearly part of what is now interpreted as the Brownian tradition of landscape design (fig. 13). Rothley Lakes were intended as a destination, with viewing stations looking over Blackett's designed landscapes and improvements. The journey and movement through the Wallington estate formed a key part of the experience and appreciation of the aesthetics and meanings of the estate's landscape.

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NOTES

¹ National Trust, Wallington Collection (hereafter NT) WAL/Plan/17 Plan of Rothley Lake (Low Lake) by Capability Brown, 1771.

² NT 582300 Survey plan of the Wallington estate 1728; 582301 Survey plan of the Wallington estate 1742; 582302 Survey plan of the Wallington estate 1777.

³ NT 582302 Survey plan of the Wallington estate 1777.

- ⁴ NT 582445 Sketch for Rothley Shield 1752.
- ⁵ NT 582512 Plan for the China Pond 1750.
- ⁶ NT WAL/Plan/8 Plan of Rothley High Lake, undated.
- ⁷ NT 582302 Survey plan of the Wallington estate 1777.
- ⁸ NT 582585 Design for 'intended building of stone where upper tent used to be', undated.
- ⁹ NT 582302 Survey plan of the Wallington estate 1777.
- ¹⁰ NT WAL/Plan/8 Plan of Rothley High Lake, undated.
- ¹¹ NT WAL/Plan/8 Plan of Rothley High Lake, undated.
- ¹² NT WAL/Plan/26 Plan of Rothley Low Lake by Capability Brown 1771.
- ¹³ NT WAL/D/330 Plan of a bridge for Rothley Lake by Capability Brown 1771.
- ¹⁴ NT WAL/D/238 Plan for a proposed boat house and round tower for Rothley Lake by Capability Brown 1771.
- ¹⁵ NT WAL/D/31A Plan of a proposed house at Rothley Lake by Capability Brown 1771; WAL/D/31B Plan of a proposed house at Rothley Lake by Capability Brown 1771.
- ¹⁶ NT WAL/Plan/26 Plan of Rothley Low Lake by Capability Brown 1771.

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