

THE MAKING OF THE BOWOOD LANDSCAPE

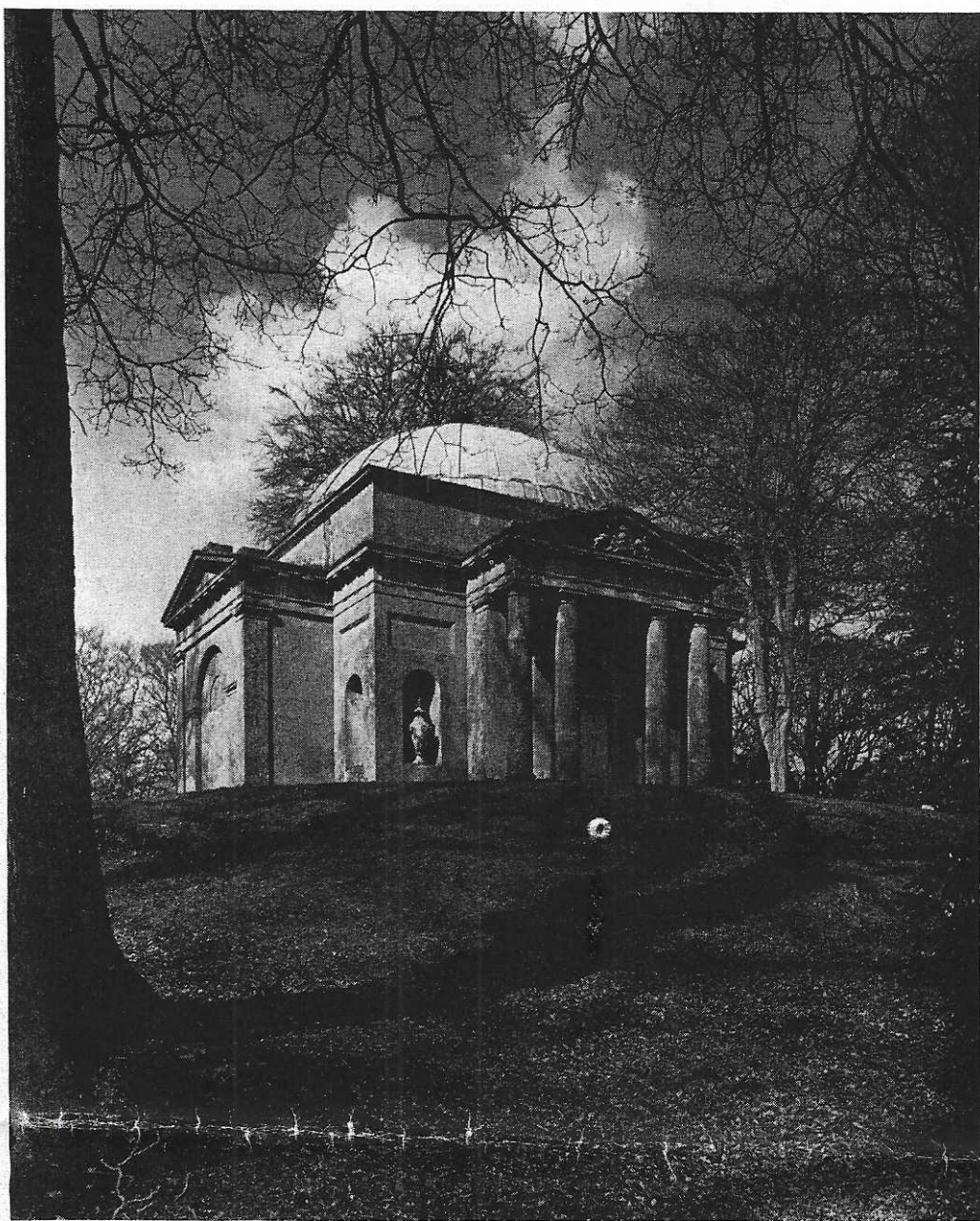
By JOHN CORNFORTH

The park at Bowood, in Wiltshire, largely formed under the direction of Capability Brown in the 1760s, is not only one of the least known of his works, but also one of his finest. Architecturally its principal monument is the mausoleum designed by Adam in 1761.

“WHAT would you give to know the consequences of the visit of the famous Mr. Brown & the fruit of the 30 guineas which I gave him,” wrote the 1st Earl of Shelburne to his heir on November 2, 1757. All his neighbours were agog about what might have been suggested, but in fact Mr. Brown was very silent, and Lord Shelburne thought it better to laugh than cry over the episode, because crying would not bring back the fee; and anyway he was sure “the Man means to present me, at some future time, with a well digested plan for this place, & perhaps to come to me on the spot, to explain it.”

However Brown turned out to be slow as well as silent for it seems that his plan was not produced before Lord Shelburne died in 1761, and his successor did not make an agreement with him until August 10, 1762, the surviving plan being dated 1763 (Fig. 5). The payments to Brown run from 1764 to 1768, £500 in the first year, £1,000 in 1765, £605 in 1766, £500 in 1767 and a balance of £347 for 1768 that was not settled until 1771. After that Brown disappeared from the scene, and the next payment to a professional designer was one of £21 to “Mr. Eames for directing Improvements in the Park” in 1781. William Eames had started as an assistant of Brown, but by the 1780s had evidently developed a considerable practice of his own.

Although Brown had assured Lord Shelburne on his first visit that “he does not know a finer place in England than Bowood park,” the estate was then a small one and more land was needed particularly to the east to protect the house and provide scope for landscaping. Both Earls had to buy the necessary property in a piecemeal fashion over the years, and the cost of this was a constant drain on their resources. When Brown began, the eastern boundary was only a short distance beyond the Whetham brook that flowed in the valley below the house (Fig. 4), and yet this was the key to the whole scheme for his idea was to build a dam very close to the northern boundary and to flood the valley. There had been a smaller pool in the valley below as can be seen in the picture of the old house reproduced in COUNTRY LIFE of June 8, but the making of the big lake involved clearing a hamlet apparently sited close to the cottage

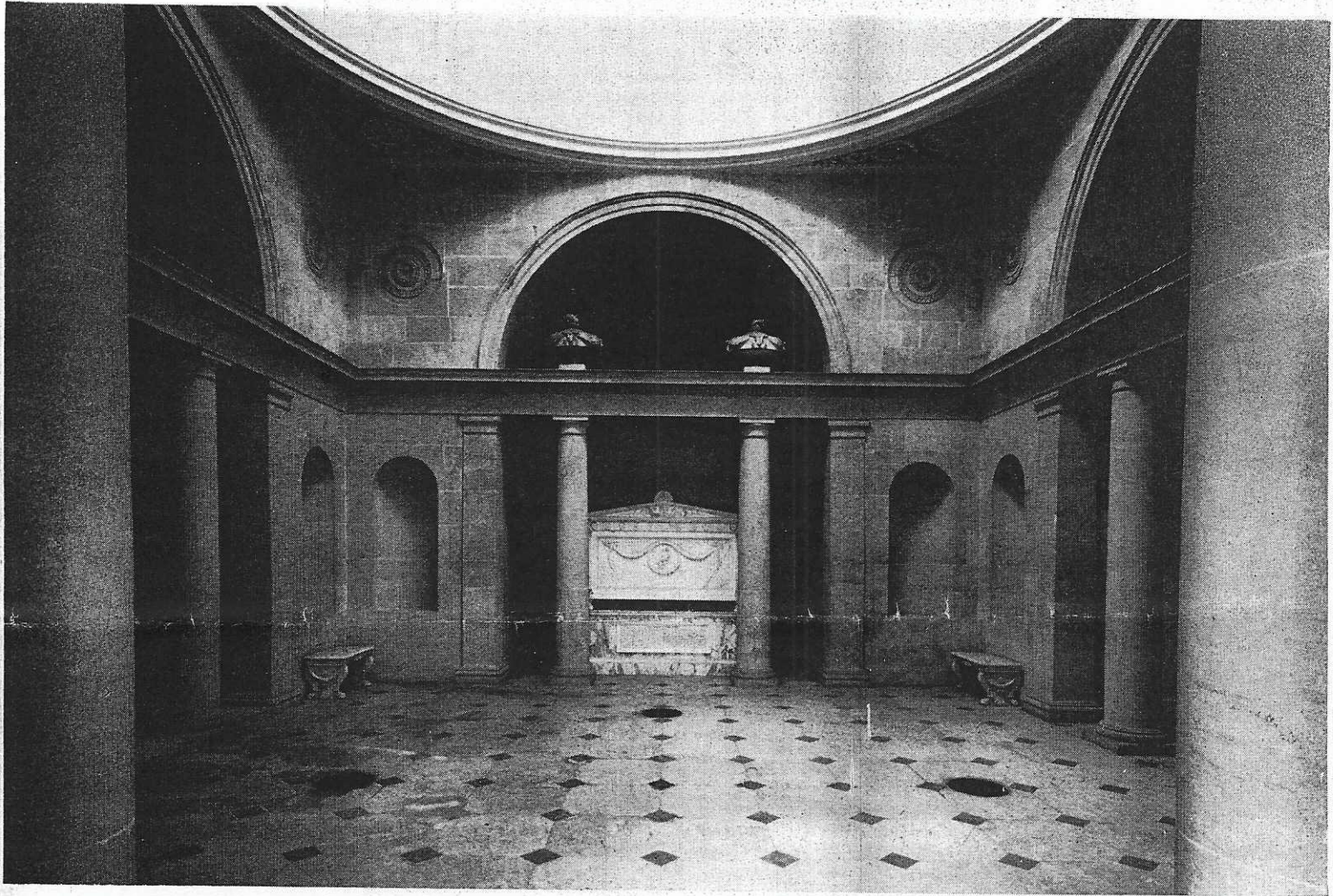


1.—THE MAUSOLEUM DESIGNED BY ROBERT ADAM. It was commissioned in the summer of 1761. (Left) 2.—THE SIDE ELEVATION OF THE MAUSOLEUM

that sits in such a picturesque fashion on the east bank and it also needed a great deal of earth moving to level and smooth out the fall of the land from the house to the east and south. To the south it slopes away more gradually towards another natural valley about half a mile away that is drained by the Washway, and here Brown constructed a second dam close to the head of an arm of the big lake so that the two would appear continuous.

The construction of the lakes and the planting of the encircling belts that were already a feature by 1773 when the estate was surveyed again (Fig. 9) are but two aspects of the creation of the landscape: considerable changes had also to be made in the local roads and the drives through the park. The road from Calne to Sandy Lane at the southern tip of the park had to be re-made on a more





3.—THE INTERIOR OF THE MAUSOLEUM WITH CARLINI'S MONUMENT TO THE 1ST EARL OF SHELBURNE

route that Adam produced his Roman aqueduct designs, one of which he included in his *Works*, but it was too elaborate a project, and in the end the drive crossed the Washway further upstream. It was then taken past the Menagerie before turning north-west towards the house, approaching it so as to get the greatest impact from the massing of the Big

House and the Adam wing. It was a route that impressed John Britton writing in 1801 for the contrast it offered between "the wildness and picturesque appearance of the scenery around the bridge" and "the smooth shorn lawn contiguous to the house."

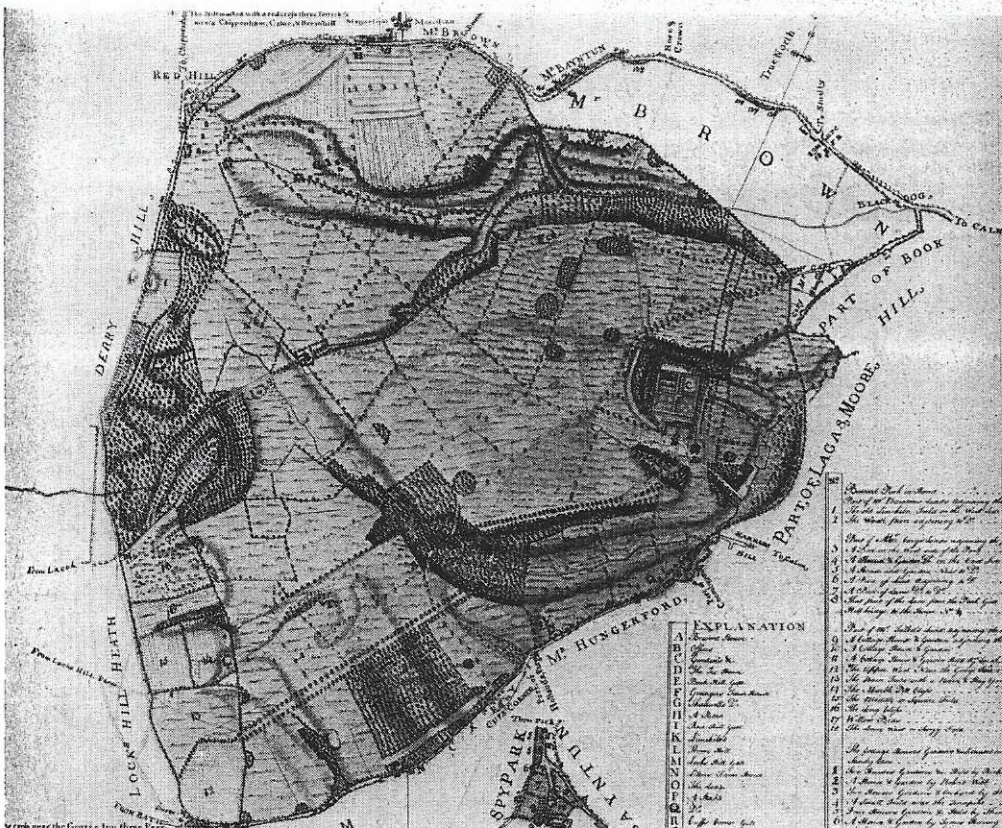
Today most people enter the park at the Derryhill gate designed by Barry, and here

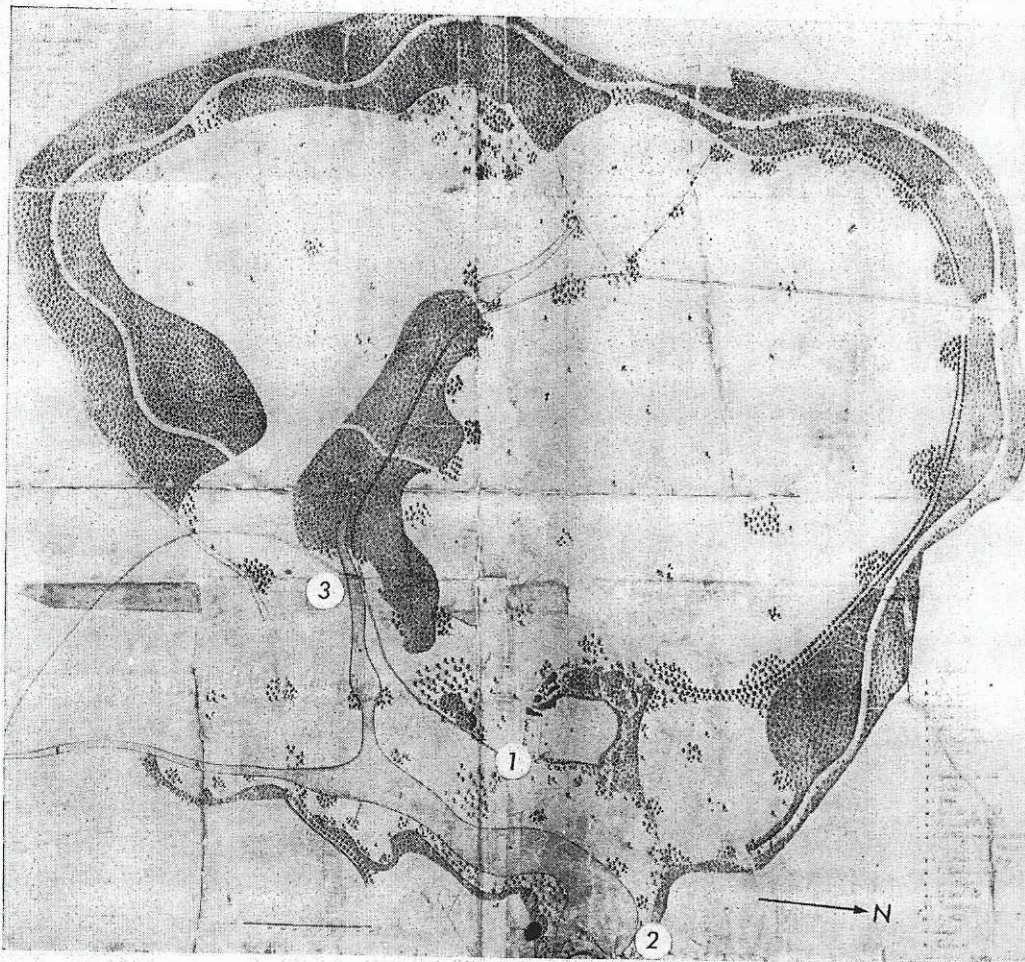
Brown provided a choice of drives, one running round the northern edge of the park through the belts and coming round to the house past what became in the mid 19th century the arboretum and pleasure grounds, and the second going round in a southerly arc. The latter is the one generally used today and it not only gives a fine view of Adam's mausoleum standing high in the beechwoods on the south side of the Washway valley but shows off the park against a recurring backdrop of the Downs to the south-east. Inevitably there has had to be some replanting, but the way the drive winds in and out of the beech woods is most skilfully managed, and there is nothing tame and artificial about the scenery.

The payments to Brown provide a general dating for the making of the landscape, but in Lady Shelburne's journal there are some specific references. By the time she married much of the basic work was done, but her entry for June 16, 1766 is typical of many: "As soon as breakfast was over we took a walk and were vastly pleased with the effect of the water which flows into a magnificent river, and only wants now to rise to its proper height, which it comes nearer to every day."

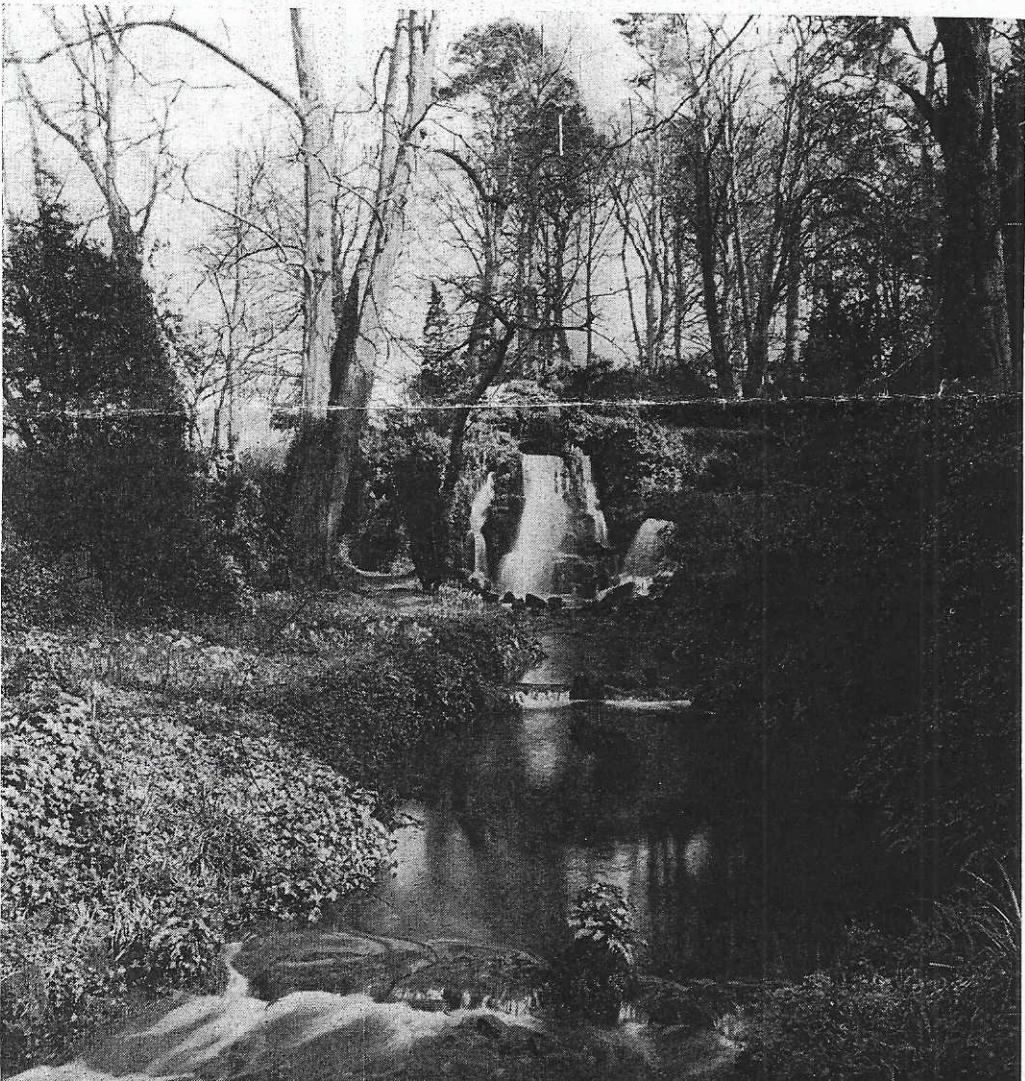
By 1773 when the estate was surveyed Brown's landscape was complete and so was its principal architectural feature, Adam's mausoleum (Figs. 1-3), commissioned by the Dowager Countess of Shelburne immediately after her husband's death in May, 1761.

Designed in his most disciplined manner, it is a rare piece of almost abstract classicism with its doric portico balanced by transepts and sanctuary so that in all views of it one gets a sense of movement through projection and recession in three principal planes with subsidiary rhythms and contrasts of light and shade created by the detailing of the end walls and by the niches: it is like a piece of sculpture that one is compelled to walk round and round,



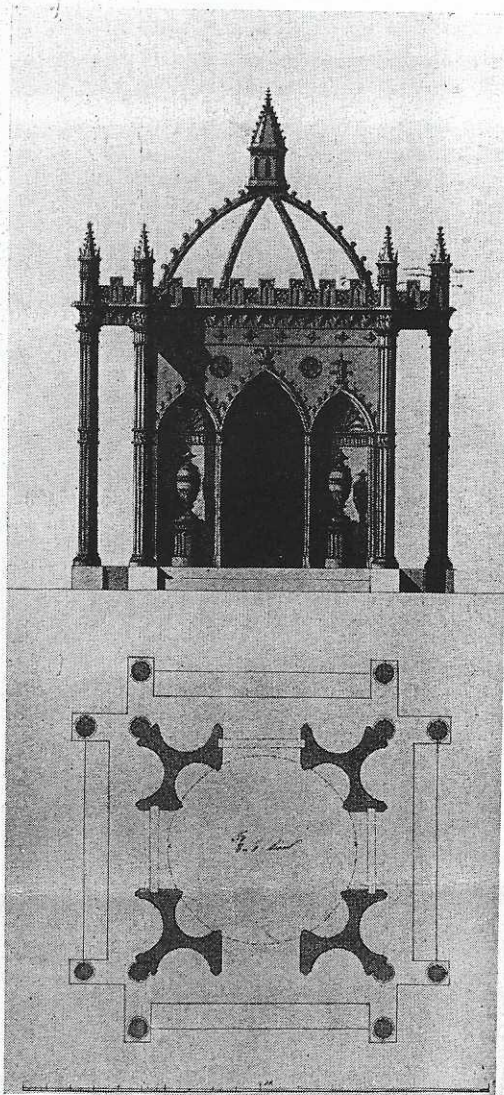


5.—BROWN'S PROPOSAL FOR THE PARK, 1763. 1, the House; 2, the Dam; 3, presumed site for the Aqueduct Bridge. (Below) 6.—THE CASCADE AT THE NORTH END OF THE LAKE. Designed by Hamilton and apparently constructed by Josiah Lane



screen of columns and the entablature that runs all round, the screens separating it from and framing the arched recesses intended for the family tombs. Ahead lies Angostino Carlini's monument to the 1st Earl which was not finally delivered until the mid 1770s, payments to him occurring in 1772, 1774 and 1775.

The seats seen in the illustration are also by Adam and among the most interesting pieces of early neo-Classical furniture. The design is based on a porphyry tomb said to be that of Agrippa in one of the niches under the portico of the Pantheon, which was illustrated both by Desgodetz and Piranesi. The Adam drawing shows that he used the design for the hall at Shelburne House, and Linnell's bill includes a charge of £21 5s. "To making and carving 5 Hall Stools like them at Bowood and painting the same," on July 28, 1768 and making three to match on November 16. As eight were listed in the 1806 sale at Lansdowne House, it is tempting to regard the ones now at



7.—A DESIGN FOR A GARDEN TEMPLE BY WILLIAM THOMAS, 1780. One of a number of unexecuted projects for garden buildings considered by the 2nd Earl

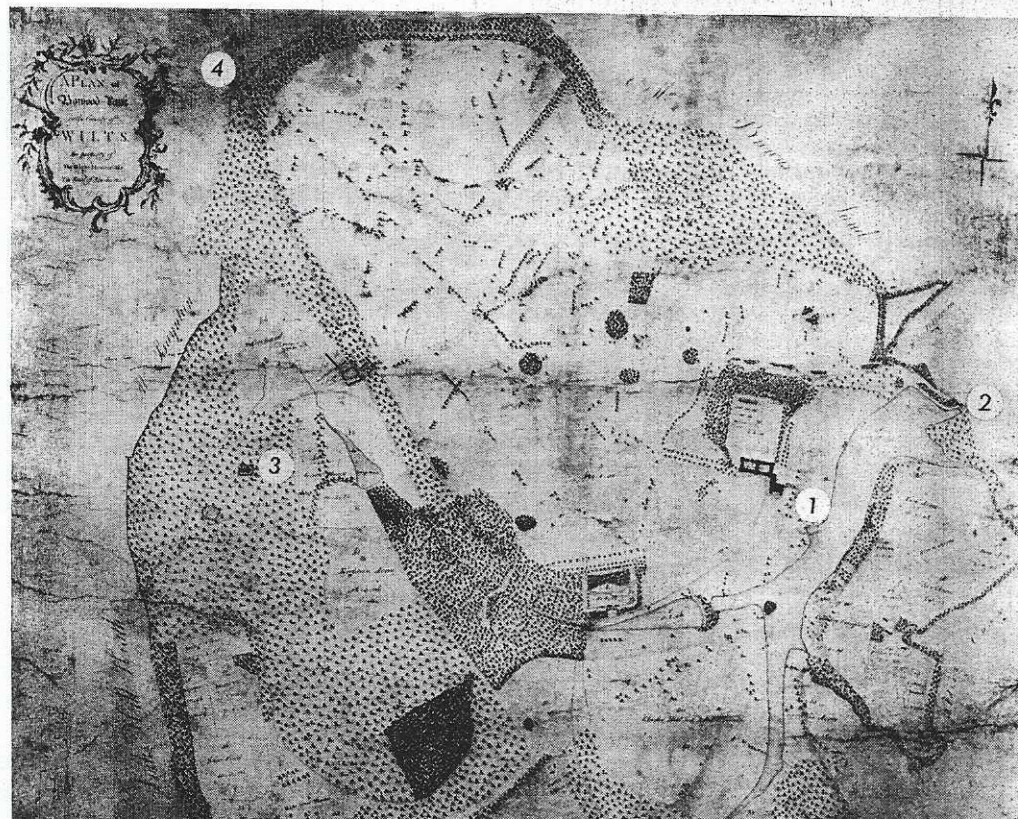
Bowood as not only designed by Adam but made by Linnell.

One of the qualities of Bowood in Britton's eyes, in 1801, was that "In the grounds, no inanimate leaden statues, senseless busts, nor ostentatiously unmeaning obelisks, obtrude themselves on the eye of the wandering visitant," but if Lord Shelburne had followed up all his schemes the park would have been almost as full as Stowe. In 1766 Adam designed a semi-circular greenhouse and a banqueting house and two years later produced his first design for an aqueduct bridge, illustrated in his *Works in Architecture*. Belanger in his tour

that might have earned Britton's scorn and in fact won his praise was the cascade at the bottom of the lake (Fig. 6). "The generality of *made* cascades, are too tame and *uninterestingly regular*," he wrote, "The tasteless step-like disposition of the stones, displease the eye, and disgust the fancy." But he tells us that the Bowood cascade "was designed by a man of real taste; Mr. Hamilton, of Pains Hill, who took a picture of N. Poussin's for his model. Mr. Josiah Lane assisted in the function of this stupendous work; but it was *finished* under the direction of the present Marquis." There are payments to Lane in 1785, 1786 and 1787, but he was not a new discovery for he had worked for Lord Shelburne 20 years before at Wycombe, a connection that raises the possibility of his having also worked at West Wycombe as well. According to Farington he and his son constructed the grotto at Oatlands, now destroyed; they also did the Painshill grotto, which was also in Surrey, and in 1792, the grotto at Wardour Castle, Wiltshire.

The cascade is a charming piece of Rococo fantasy rather than evocative of those sublime qualities admired by the Romantics, for its situation is undeniably artificial. It lies at the bottom of the lake which is contained by an immense earth dam, whose existence becomes apparent when one crosses it. The ground to the north is closely planted, and it is the sound of water that suggests the existence of a waterfall; but instead of falling away from the dam down into the valley, the water is carried round so that the waterfall is at right angles to the dam, and the water splashes down the rocks and into a little river that is parallel to the dam.

A little way to the east of the cascade is the Hermit's Cave, a feature that may also have been suggested by Charles Hamilton, for there survives his plan for a more elaborate grotto, but it may have had a more serious purpose than the one of conjuring up a poetic mood. The vault is still incrustated with mineralogical specimens and these may be survivors of a collection that R. E. Raspe mentioned in a letter to Lord Shelburne in 1787: "About two years since the Rev. Mr. Townsend of Pewsey, then forming a Collection of Cornish Ores and Crystallizations, mentioned to me that it was intended for a Grotto at Bowood."



8.—THE EAST FRONT OF THE HOUSE SEEN ACROSS THE LAKE. (Left) 9.—A SURVEY OF THE PARK AT BOWOOD IN 1773 SHOWING BROWN'S PROPOSALS EXECUTED. 1, the House; 2, site of future cascade; 3, Mausoleum; 4, Derryhill

There are various routes one can take at the north end of the lake, but invariably they bring one to the Doric Temple from which there are some of the best views. In all seasons it is a wonderful place, for even in the winter there is colour in the dogwood, and the willows seem to promise spring. Inevitably much of the park away from the house now has to be farmed, but this too introduces new colours in high summer, the increasingly heavy greens being broken with gold.

When one looks at the landscape today and thinks of all the planting that has gone on since Brown paid his first visit, and how it has been modified and extended, it is impossible not to marvel at his imagination and feeling for scale. Fortunately his composition has not been destroyed by the demolition of the Big House, nor has its balance been upset; rather has his lake become an even more important feature. Indeed it has become the key to Bowood, rewriting history so that the house now appears to be set on a river bank (Fig. 8). One might interpret this as a conceit that would delight Brown or as