

Bringing Order to Strata Florida: A Brownian Fantasy

*Consult the Genius of the Place in all,
That tells the Waters or to rise or fall,
Or helps the' ambitious Hill the heavn's to scale,
Or scoops in circling Theatres the Vale,
Calls in the Country, catches opening glades,
Joins willing woods,
And varies shades from shades.*

Alexander Pope, *Epistle to Lord Burlington*, 1731.

At the outset it should be said that there's no evidence that Lancelot 'Capability' Brown ever visited Strata Florida, the one-time Cistercian abbey, once described as the Westminster Abbey of Wales, but latterly crumbled to a minor gentry farm. However, two centuries after the Dissolution Brown brought 'order' to the setting of the former Cistercian Roche Abbey and his outstanding contributions to landscape practice elsewhere, when nature was no longer to be tamed but embraced, prompts the question, how in context would he have applied his arcadian capabilities to the remnants of Strata Florida. This is therefore an exercise in 'what if'.

The Place

Strata Florida was not alone. All over Britain former monastic houses and their lands that had survived up to the Dissolution and not subordinated as cathedral chapters were absorbed into private estates, subject to the whims and priorities of their new secular owners. Some were adapted more or less comfortably as domestic dwellings, others were robbed for their often-superior building materials, or fell into ruination and earthworks with just a placename to remember them by. Their environs and wider estates were almost invariably absorbed into existing farms or parkland. But whatever their physical fate these sites still retain what Schama describes as indelible layers of place and memory, awaiting excavation (Schama 1995).

Here in Wales, Llantarnam Abbey in Monmouthshire was one of the luckier ones. Founded as a daughter house of Strata Florida it finally closed in 1536, following which its vast tracts of lands, including the immediate abbey environs, were sold to the Morgan family. The abbey itself was remodelled as an elaborate Tudor revival house but the site went through several changes of use, including as a US Army depot in World War II, after which it again became a monastic institution, this time in the hands of the Sisters of St Joseph of Annecy.

Strata Marcella, another Cistercian foundation and near Welshpool, was already failing at the time of Dissolution. Baron Grey of Powis, the new owner, removed everything of value, the abbey was demolished and its stone used to build local churches. Poor security during the 19th century archaeological investigations resulted in even more loss of materials. Today the only visible remains are a few courses of stones at Abbey Farm, beside the River Severn.

North of Llandeilo, Talley Abbey was founded by Rhys ap Gruffydd ('The Lord Rhys' of Deheubarth) for the monks of the Premonstratensian order. Lack of money however meant that the scale and ambition of the original design was never realised and when the abbey was dissolved the structure was mined for

stone to build much of the present village and the adjacent chapel. Just the ruinous west gate, albeit still standing almost to its full height, now remains.

Strata Florida was fortunate in the patronage and therefore security of the self-same Lord Rhys. In its secluded and sparsely populated Cambrian foothills the site was ideally suited to the contemplative lives of Cistercians who sought to occupy the 'waste' places of the world – the wilderness – and through *ora et labor* (prayer and work), make them productive. Situated near the headwaters of the River Teifi, Camden describes, 'nere unto which at Rosse the mountainers keepe the greatest faire for cattaille in all those parts, untill it come to Strat-fleur, a monastery long since of the Cluniack monks, compassed about with hills.' (Camden 1637). He could have added that 'Rosse' had been granted a market licence by the Abbey, an astute move given the stock-rearing capacity of the monastic lands. The need for copious supplies of water for religious, domestic and industrial purposes was largely met by the Glasffrwd, the energetic, diverted tributary of the adjacent Teifi; the sacred connotations of the former will be returned to presently.

Externally the extensive sheep grazing on the uplands provided the wool, another essential source of income. Proximity to the sea facilitated fishing, trade and the import of building materials. Woodland provided building materials and fuel, supplemented by nearby peat-cuttings, principally from the post-glacial raised bog of Cors Caron, with its bonus of wildfowl and fish. Being on the junction of two major transmontane routes facilitated the essential contacts with other foundations, but the hospitality that had to be afforded to travellers was often burdensome.

Consistent with Cistercian practice, albeit somewhat larger than was normal, the 100 acres or so of productive valley bottom land was divided into two precincts, Outer and Inner. The Outer sustained the material needs of the Abbey: gardens and orchards, grazing and barns; the preparation of vellum, leather and linen, as well as forging, fulling and grist mills. The West Gatehouse between the Inner and Outer Precincts was the interface between secular and sacred, comprising reception, administration and the treasury. Ahead a level open space, a range of buildings including the guesthouse, beyond which rose the West Door of the Abbey Church, backed by the steep outlier of Pen-lan.

Thus far not all that different from other such foundations, but there is much more to Strata Florida than just its monastic role. Describing the Abbey and its environs as a 'transcendently numinous place', prior to the arrival of the Cistercians, Professor David Austin adds that, 'It is hard to escape the impression that this has been a sacred valley for millennia and that Strata Florida was deliberately intended to appropriate this ancient and spiritual and cultural connection' (Austin 2019); indeed that the Cistercians may have been preceded by a large Celtic monastery as evidenced by the remains of a holy well in front of the Abbey's high altar, fed from the Glasffrwd to the south. This in turn was itself partially fed by another holy and healing well and at least two more upstream. The source of the river is, uniquely for the region, surrounded by prehistoric monuments. Together with it being a centre of healing and spiritual well-being and its reputation for scholasticism and political affiliation, Austin's assertion that Strata Florida was, 'the focal inspiration for the cultural, social and political aspirations of a small nation which has fought so hard to

retain its language and identity.' (ibid) must be incontrovertible and hence the accolade of Westminster Abbey of Wales.

Dissolution therefore not only tumbled an important monastic foundation, but also brought this place of secluded spirituality and unique significance to Welsh culture into jeopardy.

All Change

We now move forward to the 18th century, the Age of Enlightenment, marked by a surge of interest in the antiquities of Britain. Simultaneously the elite were investing their new-found wealth – typically from extractive industries or the slave trade – in land and building. In turn this led to a dramatic change in the perception and usage of designed landscapes that immediately captivated the aristocracy fresh from the Grand Tour, an imaginative rationalisation of ancient practices adapted to the specific needs of the landed elites in the age of physiocracy. Reflecting the writings of Virgil and Pliny and the paintings of Poussin and Claude Lorraine nature was to be embraced and celebrated, not suppressed. Harold Walpole was describing landscape gardening as a sister art to poetry and painting and some even drew parallels with theatre. In his epistle to Lord Burlington Alexander Pope also ruled that, 'All must be adapted to the Genius and Use of the Place ...' and Wilkie reminds us that the way we live on and use the land is as important as we feel about it; the personality, identity or spirit of the place (Wilkie 2019). In Wales itself there was a growing appreciation of its culture – language, literature and, yes, poetry and landscape.

In practice, with the emergence of the polite society, the effect on designed landscape was the culmination of a gradual movement in the early decades of the century, away from compartmentalisation, geometry and formality of built structures, to be replaced by the 'natural' elements of garden, park and countryside as the essential settings for country seats. Straight lines were eschewed in favour of serpentine, vistas were opened up and framed and 'gardens eased out of their corsets and given new clothes', providing more scope for social interaction in walks. Enclosed formal gardens on the facades of the house were swept out of sight to the sides or rear, to be replaced by open expanses of grassland, even close to the house, usually managed as wildflower meadows, grazed before being cut for hay. Walled enclosures were flattened, avenues felled and buildings incompatible with the design moved or demolished. Previously fashionable shrubberies were uprooted. Productive or semi-productive facilities, such as orchards, fishponds, dovecotes, barns, and farmyards were also banished to a distance. Whereas the pleasure garden evoked effortless plenty the kitchen garden celebrated the beauty of toil, plain and simple; a place of business, noise and noxious odour; more reasons to isolate it from the house to provide an interlude on the mandatory perambulations. 'Orchard & 'garden' still had a strongly overlapping meaning, derived from Homeric tradition, combining fruit and flowers. Planting comprised irregular scatters of solitary trees and clumps, and the setting was surrounded, wholly or partly, by a perimeter belt. Ornamentation was confined to a serpentine body of water and a scatter of buildings as carefully disposed eye-catchers.

Thus towers and ruins were regarded with a respect and depth of feeling, very particularly those of former abbeys because of their aesthetic magnetism and

connection with a once great and unswerving faith and spirituality. Ann Radcliffe's account of visiting the ruined Furness Abbey in Cumbria vividly evokes, 'the images and manners of times, that were past'. (Owens 2020). If not solely for their spiritual associations former monastic sites were therefore also much sought after for their compatibility with prevailing fashion, their potential for conversion into grand mansions, their often-superior farmlands and as a source of recyclable, high quality building materials.

Mr Brown At Work

At the start of the century buildings dominated landscape, but the appreciation of nature became an important balancing factor through a technique of respecting association, the need to entangle past and present. 'Capability' Brown (1716–83) wasn't the sole progenitor of this new Arcadian concept, of mankind working in peaceful harmony with nature. Nevertheless, he became one of the most influential landscape designers in the 1750s to 1770s and his creations of refined minimalism came to define the 'polite' in a rural context at a critical time which saw that newly invigorated and expanding landed elite investing in this latest landscape design on an ambitious and competitive scale. However this new trend became associated so closely with him because, commercially, he was its most successful practitioner and he'd habitually refer to the great capabilities of the places where he worked. But there was more and perhaps William Mavor's tribute sums it up best: "Brown possessed an originality of conception, a poet's eye and an instinctive taste for rural embellishment ... he viewed nature with the enthusiasm of a lover" (Jacques 1983). In his obituary of Brown Walpole observed that, far from corrupting nature, [such] 'was the effect of his genius that when he was the happiest man, he will be least remembered; so closely did he copy nature that his works will be mistaken.' (Stroud 1950). To which should be added his artistic flair for architecture in the then contemporary Palladian style, coupled with immense energy, a substantial business acumen and, crucially, clients in high places - and luck.

How did it work? Brown practised what today we might call the holistic approach, co-ordinating natural and artificial elements, with as little apparent effort as possible. To use his own words, he was a 'place-maker'. In a letter to an acquaintance asking how to lay out a garden in his style, Brown specified, "... a good plan, good execution, a perfect knowledge of the country and the objects in it, whether natural or artificial, and infinite delicacy in the planting etc."; advice that rings as true today as it did then. He made places that combined work and pleasure and perfected nature. His new look for agriculture aimed to synthesise beauty and utility and what we'd call today, biodiversity. While pleasure grounds and parkland were intended for very different purposes and effects, they were to be wholly complementary. Further, just as Brown's parkland adopted existing agricultural and forest traditions, so his pleasure grounds had ancient precedents; they were for indolence, luxury, for privacy and the senses. A Brownian design was supposed to look entirely natural and today, left to itself, it usually still does. 'It is as if Brown was hiding while in plain view.' 'His was such a naturalistic style that all his best work was mistaken for untouched nature. 'His landscapes were exercises in deception.' (Phibbs 2017).

Indeed, a crucial aspect of Brown's skill was his facility in hiding the artistry that underlaid his carefully moulded pastoral idylls, which typically featured spreading

greensward, lakes, artificial rivers, low mounded hills and clumps or shelter belts of trees, all offset by grazing livestock and perhaps an eyecatcher or two, though he had no compunction in knocking down houses and moving their inhabitants out of sight if they compromised his grand design. Even large trees were transplanted.

Then combining the placement and mass of trees and foliage in clumps and belts, with interest and variety given through light and shade, height, and scale – all were illuminated and animated by the play of light on water features in the midst. Circulation routes, walks, drives and rides were also fundamental to the Brownian designed landscape. On plan they appear as sinuous lines, often flowing around the whole site, connecting individual elements to form the skeleton of the design, on which the rest of the features are fleshed out. Whether walking, driving or riding, approaches received particular attention, with carefully contrived pleasant things to see en-route, hence 'The Burst' – the grand, often first view, 'The Peep' – a tantalising glimpse, probably while in motion. Then there was the self-descriptive 'Panorama'.

Echoing Whately (1770) Brown would have successively staged, 'the most perfect composition of a place that can be imagined': 'a garden opening into a park, with a short walk through the latter to a farm, and ways along its glades to ridings in the country' (Phibbs 2017).

Despite its name and deep European roots, a *ferme ornée* is essentially an English term for a design that combines agricultural production with ornamental plantings, making a thing of beauty out of a productive farm. For Brown and his contemporaries this translated into a usually gravelled walk around a field – usually a hay meadow – that contained carefully contrived diversionary scenes or compartments, one of which could be the kitchen garden, not as we've seen to be hidden from the house to conceal it from visitors, so much as to reserve it as a surprise.

Brown was also an architect as well as landscape designer and during his career he provided designs for rebuilding, extending, or modernising around twenty gentry houses. At Milton Abbey in Dorset the 'ancient church' was converted into a mansion and Brown was called in the first instance to surround it with a landscape park as productive farmland, this being judged to be perfectly consistent with Milton's monastic character, although he saw to it that the village of Abbey Milton was demolished to make way for the parkland. The quasi-religious Delcombe Manor was built in c.1750, re-using medieval material from the abbey. A latter folly – 'The Ruins' was also built out of the ruined masonry of the ancient abbey and echoing Strata Florida, both conveyed the spirituality that infused Milton (ibid). At Roche Abbey in Yorkshire (Fig.1), Brown was instructed, 'To finish all the Valley of [the] Abbey in all its Parts ... with Poets feeling and with Painters Eye' and to form a landscape park around the mansion, the medieval abbots' park having been situated to the east of the abbey.

As we've noted Brown's success was, in no small part, sustained by his business model. Charging ten guineas a day he provided a rapid initial site assessment after an hour or so around the site on horseback, after which he would sketch out the 'great capabilities' of the place. If approved by his client he'd then offer to provide a detailed plan of the proposed improvements, which, if also

approved, would be carried out by his trusted 'capability men' – sometimes alongside the client's own workforce. In today's terms he offered a design and build service. Otherwise he wouldn't commit himself to written reports, except for summarised directions, of which more later.

Meanwhile in Wales

There were some outstanding examples of Brown's work in Wales. At Cardiff Castle he oversaw a major programme of 'improvement', including filling in and grassing over the moat and landscaping the walled enclosure, though not everybody was smitten by the outcome, one describing it as 'only calculated for the town bowling green.' Sir Watkin Williams Wynn's Wynnstay was Brown's largest commission where he replaced the older formal gardens with lawns which swept right up to the house overlooking the lake. At Parc Dinefwr, with its 12th century castle dominating the Tywi floodplain counterpointed by the Pen Lan clumps, George Rice, an agriculture moderniser, had already made a start with creating a naturalistic landscape, 'a complete rotund of woods, shrubberies, hills, dales, slopes and sweeps' and although Brown suggested some refinements, in essence the work was already complete, leading to his comment that, "Nature has been truly bountiful and Art has done no harm" (20th August 1775); in effect his 15 proposals would only amount to a few adjustments to restore the timeless harmony of the place, though his contribution is still marked in Brown's Walk.

But generally, all was not well in Wales. The richest and increasingly anglicised landowners lived in a grand manner, but the risk of catastrophic indebtedness was ever present through extravagant lifestyles, political manoeuvring, or a lack of male heirs. One of the consequences was the concentration of properties. This had been under way since the Restoration, and wealthy, sometimes absentee, landlords seized every opportunity to expand their acreage. This trend was inevitably accompanied by a corresponding decline in the smaller gentry holdings, often already crippled by heavy mortgages, land taxes, county rates and tenancy arrears, and therefore a perpetual shortage of ready funds, made worse in 1739–41 with a combination of terrible weather, harvest failures, food shortages, high prices, disease and mortality.

As a result many country houses that had once been of critical importance in their communities lost their status as mansions and either became farmhouses or fell into ruin. Former monastic estates were therefore not immune and it's possible that the Stedmans (originally from Staffordshire), the beneficial owners of the now Great Abbey Farm, contrived a substantial mansion out of Strata Florida's western cloister range. This was shortly abandoned (for reasons unknown) and a more modest gentry house was built out of the collapsed remains of the Abbey refectory in the conventional mid-Wales plas style of the period; but clearly a matter of pride as demonstrated by the Buck print of the West View of the Abbey at Fig. 2, that has become the definitive representation of the place in the mid-1700s.

So now to Nanteos, the Powell's grand Georgian estate, just a brisk canter north-westwards from Strata Florida, in a beautiful natural landscape of park and pleasure grounds, complementing one of the most important houses of the period in west Wales that had replaced its demolished predecessor. Indeed, the Powells were keen landscapers in the contemporary fashion, albeit not always

carrying out their sweeping visions. They have a place in our story because, in the absence of relevant archives, it's hard to know whether it was monetary problems, lack of a male heir or both, but the outcome was that the long-established Stedman ownership of the Strata Florida estate came to an end in 1743 and Thomas Powell of Nanteos took possession of the estate in lieu of debts owed to him.

We now enter the realm of conjecture. We're going to assume that Thomas Powell, descended as he was from later medieval Welsh lords and princes, was very well aware of the historic and spiritual importance of Strata Florida, reinforced by that newly appreciated and powerful magnetism of the ruins of ancient abbeys. Accordingly, we're hypothesising that he resolved to protect, 'conserve' and celebrate the core of this special place to complement his seat at Nanteos and to embellish his own standing by so doing. So, who better than the celebrated Mr Brown to bring order to his newly acquired Abbey Farm, depicted at Fig.3., in the prevailing fashion.

Mr Brown At Strata Florida

From his vantage point on Pen-lan Brown would have noted with pleasure the ruins of the Abbey, clothed in vegetation and backed by well-grown trees that might have reminded him of Roche Abbey, as well as the well-watered valley encompassed by woodland and the smooth grazed turf of Y Green contrasting with those ragged ruins. But he'd be disconcerted that the imposing mansion that had been contrived from the west range of the Abbey had gone, to be replaced by this somewhat modest 'villa' with its point-blank frontage, set low alongside and hemmed by yards, barns and walled enclosures. This immediately posed a problem of proportionality; an area the size of Abbey Farm had to be matched by a mansion of grandeur and status. On being consulted Powell would have been adamant that his new house couldn't be substantially altered, let alone replaced, and Brown would've been equally forceful that the proposed landscaping scheme must therefore be substantially reduced. Neither would want to jeopardise their reputations so we're now having to assume that the commission was scaled down to the former inner precinct, as shown at Fig. 4.

Within this much reduced area – Brown might think of it as the nucleus of a ferme ornée with a central hay meadow – the energetic little river could be used to better advantage. The remnants of the former gatehouse had potential as an entrance lodge, appropriately delapidated in appearance. The upstanding Abbey ruins clearly was the principal eyecatcher, though the fallen debris would have to be dealt with and grassed over. The graveyard with its medieval parochial chapel would be respected and any changes other than planting must be minimal. The already well-watered hillside behind had potential for pleasure grounds with planting in variety, as well as a faux ruin as a panoramic viewpoint as an interlude during a circuit walk. Although the avenue was undoubtedly an asset it needed softening. The through road was an abomination, entirely un-befitted to a place of this importance, but happily there was the possibility of a diversion along a pre-existing route.

Following his usual practice he'd have set out his analysis and advice in a memorandum, prefaced by, 'That Mr Powell's intentions with relation to the improvement of this place and Mr Brown's directions with regard to it may not

be forgotten I shall leave them with the plan given by Mr Brown'. Here then follows a conjectured summary in his characteristically terse style, accompanied by a preliminary sketch plan (Fig. 5).

First, the course of the tributary to be re-diverted and impounded to form a lake on the western edge of Y Green with a cascade at its exit. A belt of trees to conceal the lake from view.

The roads to be modified to prevent through passage before the abbey and house, these to be reached along the route of the earlier road on the precinct perimeter and adjacent to the river, providing peeps of the abbey.

A new lodge to be devised from the gatehouse ruins to signal imminent arrival with a burst view.

The abbey ruins to be retained in the hands of nature but the tumbled rubble to be tidied, banked and blended with the lawns.

The house to be added to with a bay, the better to improve oblique views out. A tree clump planted before the front door to also encourage diagonal or lateral views.

The yards and barns before the house to be removed elsewhere and replaced by lawns enclosed by a sunken hedge before the house and abbey. Likewise, all bounding walls to be removed.

Y Green (the main enclosure) to be retained as a sheep-grazed, hay meadow and planted with screeds [single trees] at its centre, bounded by orchards as at present with the kitchen garden as surprises, the whole threaded by a gravelled path.

The northern perimeter to be bounded with low linear banks, tumbled to break their linearity, topped with tree clumps.

The avenue to be broken, adding new planting to turn the survivors into clumps. Middle-ground clumps also to be planted at point-blank to soften the view of the Abbey's west front.

The sloping enclosure on the south of the mansion to be laid out as pleasure gardens laced with grass paths, pools and cascades, merging into wood pasture on its periphery. A summer house of Abbey stone to be placed at its apex to scan the prospects.

External walks to be laid out round the periphery and holy wells for safe, sheltered exercise. Rides to be provided to the most scenic points, notably Pen Y Bannau and Teifi Pools.

Having presented his plan and directions Brown would enquire as to whether Mr Powell wished his men, with all their 'capabilities' to execute the plan, in whole or part. We must now imagine that Mr Powell was in a quandary. The costs of the proposed works were not inconsiderable and would be in addition to those already committed and planned at Nanteos. Further, a working farm would be let more profitably than a minor country seat, albeit in the height of fashion.

Brown's invoice would therefore be paid, his plan and directions consigned to a drawer and this fantasy therefore draws to a close.

Reflections

Nevertheless we may conclude that, if only in miniature, the inner precinct of the 18th century Strata Florida would have lent itself very well to a Brownian re-ordering in his refined, minimalistic style. Art would have done it no harm, though latter-day archaeologists might have reservations on that point. But some three centuries later might it still be feasible today? in essence it probably would and thereby provide a very fitting setting for the monument, but circumstances are now much altered, probably the most important being that whereas Thomas Powell was the sole landlord, this former precinct is now divided into five separate ownerships and that's not including statutory authorities with their own responsibilities. The capital cost would be well over a million, without a foreseeable means of offsetting it and the fact that the place is now open to the public would add to the difficulties of accommodating more than the family and their friends. In any case it'd be impossible to shoehorn carparking into Brown's layout, although he might counter that members of the public should walk the final stretch thereby, even unwittingly, reflecting the monastery's rules for approaching such a holy place.

For those reasons Brown's documents must remain in the drawer. However this academic exercise has prompted one idea worth consideration, because Wilkie sees that early 18th century movement as conjuring up, 'the classical Arcadian concept of mankind working in peaceful harmony with pastoral nature', and it feels particularly relevant in this era of climate change and pandemics, politico-economic discord and uncertainty. He then asks, 'Can we hold on to the wit and spirit of what has gone before and let it inspire new ideas and design?' (Wilkie 2019); and that chimes with Austin; 'in the Strata Florida project we are re-assembling the sacred for our current needs and hopes, in a way which uses properly, as the Cistercians did themselves, the fruits of new technology amidst production, craft and labour' (Austin 2019). Could that 'peaceful harmony with pastoral nature' be therefore added to this post-Cistercian vision?

Finally, whereas Brown regarded nature as an integral part of place, in Wales (and often elsewhere) structures and nature are too often seen as being wholly unrelated in national heritage practice. So let's at least imagine him revisiting Cardiff, armed with fresh directions.

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Figures



Fig. 1. Roche Abbey: watercolour by Paul Sandby, probably 1770s. British Museum



Fig. 2. The West View of Stratflour Abbey, Sam & Nath Buck for Richard Stedman Esq., 1741. (His new house is in the right background)

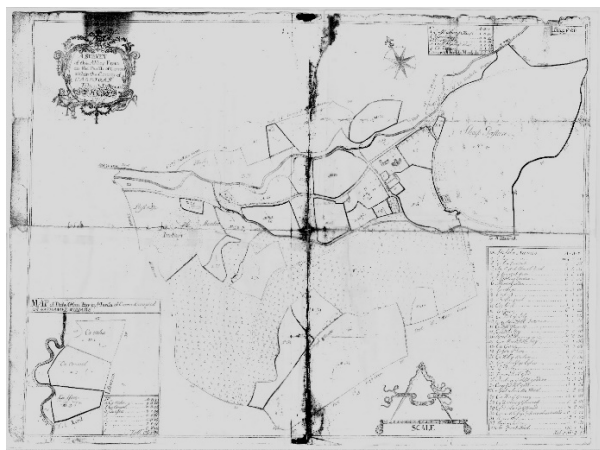


Fig. 3. Survey of Abbey Farm for Thomas Powell, 1765.

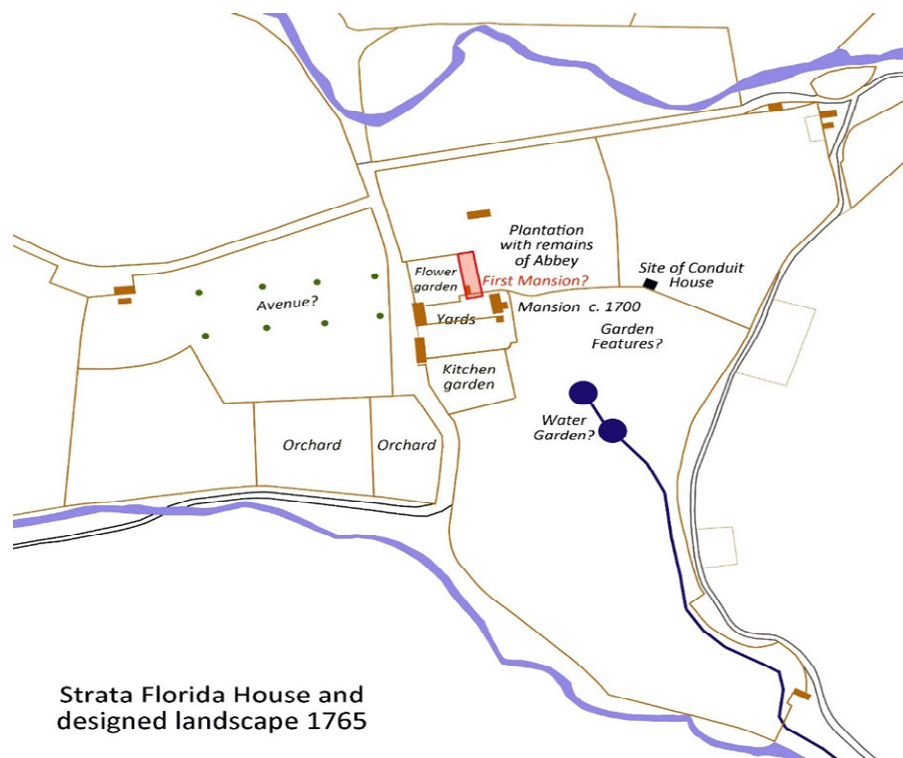


Fig. 4. Realisation of Inner Precinct 1765. Austin.

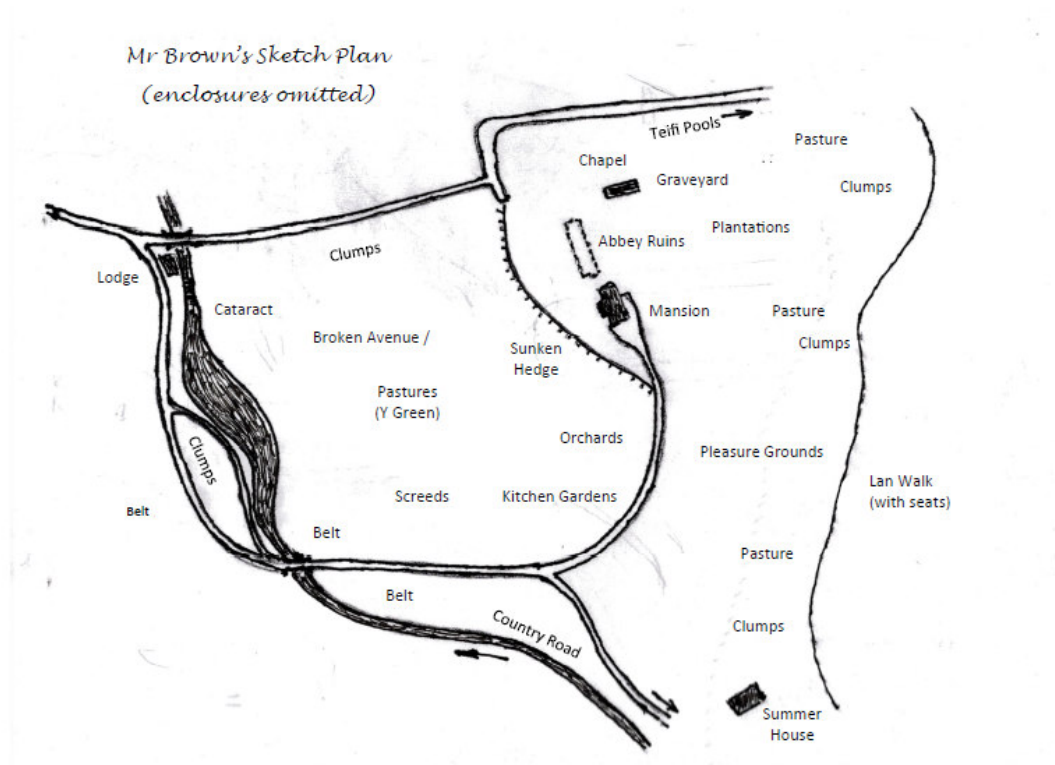


Fig. 5. Mr Brown's Conjectured Sketch Plan. MCN

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