In 1757 Capability Brown made a design for extending the lake in the 400-hectare (1,000-acre) Hatfield Forest at both ends and replanting the Cottage Coppice, for owner Jacob Houblon III.

The Houblons were a banking family who had bought the Hallingbury Park estate in Essex, including the ancient royal forest of Hatfield, in 1729. As part of his improvements to the property, Jacob Houblon developed the forest area as a "detached pleasure ground", about 1.5 kilometres from the house, where the family could picnic. In the mid 1740s he built a triangular-shaped lake there, by damming the Shermore Brook in a marshy area.

Brown’s account at Drummond’s Bank was credited with £100 (£177,500 in 2015) in March 1758 for his plan for Hatfield Forest. He received a further payment of £50 (£86,630 in 2015) in March 1762. Brown’s plan for the lake wasn’t fully carried out, but he was consulted again by the family in the early 1770s about work at Hallingbury Park.

The National Trust: www.nationaltrust.org.uk/hatfield-forest
Particular thanks to Christopher Connell of the National Trust
For more information about Brown and his work go to capabilitybrown.org/research
Brown’s plan

Brown’s unsigned “Plan for the Alteration of the Water adjoining to Cottage Coppice, 1757” shows the lake in Hatfield Forest with new arms added at each end. One of these was at the northern end, where it was fed by Shermore Brook. The other arm was at the southern end of the dam, the outlet for the brook from the lake. He also planned to create a small island towards the end of each arm and plant woodland around there, disguising the ends of the lake.

Brown’s additions were intended to make the lake appear more serpentine and river-like – an effect he often used in modifying formal pieces of water. He also wanted to soften the straight lines of the lake and the dam by creating areas of lawn and adding a seat on the west bank.

Jacob Houblon’s son, Jacob Houblon IV, was enthusiastic about Brown’s work and his design for Hatfield Forest. In a letter dated February 1759 he asked: “How does Mr Brown’s plan succeed? By what Mr Lipyeatt tells me it must be very pretty…”

Despite this support, the Chapman and André county map of 1777 reveals that only part of Brown’s plan for modifying the lake was carried out – perhaps because of the cost. The map shows that an extension and an island were only formed at the southern end, by the end of the dam. Brown’s suggestion to modify the line of the dam to make it less straight wasn’t followed.

Cottage coppice

Brown’s scheme also included grounds improvements around the the nearby cottage and Shell House (now listed Grade II*), which was built before 1757. This folly, “encrusted with shells and split flints”, was used for picnics and parties at the lake. The cottage was demolished in the 1920s.

Brown’s plan shows new, more exotic trees were to be planted along the connecting rides in this part of the forest. These included cedar of Lebanon and plane – two of Brown’s signature trees. A plane and an oak tree are still standing near the Shell House and another plane is at the end of Brown’s extension to the lake. There are also several huge yews and Scots pine along the bank here.
Capability Brown at Hatfield Forest

Capability Brown features

- Serpentine Lake (1)
- London Plane (2)
- Cedar of Lebanon (3)
- Eye-catcher
- Viewpoint

- Specimen trees
- Woodland or copse
- Parkland trees
- Shrubbery

Visitor Centre
Refreshments
Toilets
Parking

600 yards
600 metres
Brown and the Houblons
Brown’s relationship with the family resumed in the early 1770s. Then owner Jacob Houblon IV, who had once described himself as “a disciple of Mr Brown”, asked him to draw up a plan for Hallingbury. The design for this second phase of work has not survived, but it is thought to have included remodelling the kitchen garden and pleasure grounds and creating a new lake to the north of the house.

The Decoy Lake
Brown’s extension to the lake at Hatfield Forest survived until the late 20th century. In 1979 this section was separated from the main body of water, as a result of the dam being raised. This separated piece of the lake became known as the Decoy Lake, though it is not used for duck shoots, as the name suggests. The lake was enlarged by digging a wide channel behind the original northern bank, and this also created another, larger island.

Biodiversity at Hatfield Forest
At Hatfield Forest the parkland features support a variety of habitats including wood pasture and parkland, ancient woodland, deciduous woodland, good quality semi-improved grassland, lowland meadow, and habitats associated with the large lake including lowland fen.

Hatfield Forest is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and a National Nature Reserve (NNR). The rich fen area at the northern end of the lake is one of the largest known island marshes in the county. More than four hundred species of plants have been recorded here, including about thirty trees and shrubs, and many county rarities with Stinking Hellebore and Oxlip Primula being of national importance. See www.capabilitybrown.org/garden/hatfield-forest for further information about Hatfield Forest SSSI.

Hatfield Forest today
The Hallingbury estate was broken up in 1923. The house was demolished in 1924 and Hatfield Forest was bought by Edward North Buxton and donated to the National Trust.

Recent work has focused on clearing vegetation around the Decoy Lake and on the large island. This has opened up the view across the lake and allows Brown’s 18th-century island to be seen more clearly.