

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

BELSAY HALL

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Name:	BELSAY HALL
District:	Northumberland (Unitary Authority)
Parish:	Belsay
label.localisation:	Latitude: 55.098585 Longitude: -1.8628362 National Grid Reference: NZ 08851 78249 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: I List Entry Number: 1001042 Date first listed: 01-Jan-1985

Details

Early picturesque landscape composition laid out chiefly 1806-67 by Sir Charles Monck, incorporating features from an earlier landscape park developed during the C18 by the Middleton family, and the medieval Belsay Castle.

NOTE This entry is a summary. Because of the complexity of this site, the standard Register entry format would convey neither an adequate description nor a satisfactory account of the development of the landscape. The user is advised to consult the references given below for more detailed accounts. Many Listed Buildings exist within the site, not all of which have been here referred to. Descriptions of these are to be found in the List of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest produced by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The Belsay estate is inextricably linked with the Middleton family, owners from 1270 when it belonged to Sir John Middleton, Lord Chancellor to Henry III. Little is known of this early settlement on the main Newcastle to Jedburgh road.

Belsay Castle, a tower house of 1439-60, was built during one of the innumerable periods of Border warfare. High-quality masonry and surviving wall paintings indicate it was of some status and importance. There was a village to the Castle's east and probably a medieval deer park, although no licence to impark has yet been found. The field name 'Deer Park' survives in the south-west of the park, an area that corresponds with the impaled park shown on early county plans, which was the foundation of the later landscape park.

By the early C17 the relative political and social stability resulting from the Union of the Crowns in 1603 allowed the construction of one of the earliest Northumbrian, undefended houses. This manor house was built in 1614 by Thomas Middleton (d 1651), twice High Sheriff of Northumberland, and his wife Dorothy.

The even greater stability resulting from the establishment of the Hanoverians and the political Union of Scotland and England, allowed Sir William Middleton, third Bt (d 1757) who succeeded in 1717, to attend to creating an ornamental parkland landscape and gardens. Surviving earthworks, south of the Castle and Manor House, document the strong, central axis of these formal, enclosed gardens. By 1728, they consisted of grass plattes adorned with topiary (Buck, 1728). The only other remains of these gardens are a sundial of 1711 (relocated off-site).

Sir William created a landscape park which extended over the area covered by Belsay Park today. It was set out with plantations of woods and specimen trees to frame the long-distance views, notably Bantam Wood and Crag Plantation. By 1757 Bantam

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Folly, a ferme ornée, had been built facing the 'Roman' camp (as the earthworks of the prehistoric promontory fort were then thought to be), with a cold bath situated in the valley bottom. Lady Anne Middleton is reputed to have planted up Bantam Hill as a wild garden, with snowdrops (Hackett 1972). Belsay Lough (drained in 1805) was constructed to add a reflective sheet of water in the best C18 landscape tradition.

In c 1790, Sir William Middleton, fifth Bt (1738-95), Captain of the Royal Horse Guards and MP for Northumberland from 1774, diverted the public road which ran along the boundary of the earliest deer park from Burnside northwards to Sheepfold on the Morpeth road, thus increasing the enclosed area. The new road entered the park by Bankfoot from where it ran due east to meet the Ponteland to Jedburgh road, rather than leading directly past the Castle and Manor.

Sir Charles Monck (1779-1867), William's third son, inherited the Belsay estate in 1795, and also estates in Essex and Lincolnshire. Between 1804 and 1806 he travelled extensively, his diaries documenting his passion for Greek art and architecture. He recorded the new neoclassical buildings in Germany, including the Brandenburg Gate. In Greece he met Sir William Gell (1777-1836), the antiquary and topographer, whose studies of classical antiquities and architecture influenced him in his transformation of the Belsay estate, from 1806 until his death in 1867.

Belsay Hall and its landscape are the centrepiece of his large-scale estate reorganisation and improvement. Inspired by early 'picturesque' theory and following Humphry Repton's principles and techniques, Belsay is a unique, remarkable, and unusually early example of a Greek Doric house and associated picturesque landscape. The picturesque landscape incorporates the Quarry (the source of stone for the Hall), lakes, dells, ponds and a cascade, and lodges built in the Greek style to reflect the Hall. Belsay village, relocated northwards to its current position outside Belsay Park, was built in corresponding Neoclassical style.

Belsay Castle, a picturesque antiquity, was integral to his scheme. By removing its later wings, its ruined, ancient medieval parts appeared unobstructed within a ha-ha, across grazed parkland. It acted as an eyecatcher in a principal view from the Quarry. The cross shaft of the medieval village cross was relocated near the Castle. Monck's attention to detail extended to field boundaries, hemels, gates, and gate piers built in Northumbrian vernacular tradition. He experimented with stone cairns for the protection of parkland trees, which was adopted elsewhere in the county, as at Kirkharle Hall (qv).

Sir Arthur Middleton (1838-1933) inherited the estate in 1867. He was a noted gardener, laying out a Winter Garden and Yew Garden. He 'added naturalised perennials in the manner advocated by William Robinson and Himalayan rhododendrons collected by Sir William Hooker and Frank Kingdon Ward. The quarry was transformed from an awesome canyon into a sheltered garden of tender trees, exotic shrubs, climbers and ferns.' (The Garden 1997). The history of planting at Belsay is exceptionally well documented. Not only do the combined residencies of Sir Charles and Sir Arthur cover some 138 years but they were also both meticulous in keeping records of their activities.

Belsay Hall and grounds were requisitioned and used by the army in 1939-45. In 1962 Sir Stephen Hugh Middleton moved from Belsay Hall to a smaller property. Belsay Castle, Belsay Hall and gardens are now managed by English Heritage, having been taken into Guardianship by the Secretary of State in 1984. The remainder of the estate is still (2001) in private ownership. Since 1985 English Heritage has undertaken a restoration and on-going maintenance programme, and in the mid-1990s restored the Quarry Garden. The full height of the quarry cliffs and the monumental rock faces have now been revealed so that the 1830s concept of 'awesome Nature' can once more be appreciated.

SUMMARY DESCRIPTION

Belsay Hall lies 23km north-west of Newcastle upon Tyne, to the south and west of the A696, Ponteland to Jedburgh road, and situated in a rural stretch of Northumberland. Belsay village lines the east side of the A696 with the park abutting the road's west side. This forms the wooded north-east corner of the park which extends south-westwards to the B6309.

Within the 275ha park, Raven's Heugh and Bantam Hill are prominent landmarks affording long views out over the Blyth Valley to the east and to the north-west towards the Cheviot Hills. These higher areas contrast with the relatively flat, lower-lying areas extending eastwards from Belsay Castle and Belsay Hall to Belsay village. The park, incorporating these contrasting zones of high and low-lying land, is cut by two water courses, the Coal Burn on its northern boundary and Gallow Burn which flows from the south-west.

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The main approach into the park is from Belsay village where an entrance leads 1km westwards from the Smithy along a wooded drive, past Belsay Buildings. The drive then turns northwards to the north of Hall Park, and past the Fish Pond and Hall Field Lodge, said to have been the prototype of the facade for the Hall (Monck 1810-17, listed grade II). The drive then leads to the north-east front of Belsay Hall by way of the North Lodge (Monck early C19, listed grade II). Bantam Wood, to the west of the Hall and Castle, covers the northern slopes of Bantam Hill, with areas of the earlier deer park to its west and south-west. Bantam Hill is surmounted by a prehistoric promontory fort and medieval watch tower (both scheduled ancient monuments) and the remains of Bantam Folly (1757, listed grade II).

The 14.5ha gardens at Belsay form the core of the C19 landscape set out around Belsay Hall and Belsay Castle to the west. Belsay Hall (Monck and John Dobson 1810-17, listed grade I) is in Greek Doric style and, set on a stylobate of two steps, lies at the very centre of the landscape park. The main entrance on the east side has a recessed three-bay centre with giant columns, and a giant entablature with boldly projecting cornice runs full length along the east facade. A simple, grassed turning circle stands at the entrance.

The gardens, laid out by Sir Charles Monck, survive to the south and west of the Hall and are largely unchanged apart from the Winter Garden and Yew Garden, inserted into Monck's landscape structure by Sir Arthur Middleton. The Terraced Gardens (Monck 1810-17, listed grade II) descend the slopes south of the Hall. The Upper Terrace extends as lawn immediately along the south front and around the west front. On the south it is connected to the Lower Terrace by two flights of steps. The Lower Terrace has three central parterre beds where the planting character has been restored to follow Sir Arthur Middleton's plant list of 1923. The ha-ha wall with arched deer shelters beneath (Monck 1810-17, listed grade II) affords an open view across to the lake at Crag Wood to the south. The Rhododendron Garden (1ha) lies on the north-west tip of Crag Lake and many of its mid C19 to early C20 specimens survive.

The Quarry Garden is situated to the west of the walled garden and Terrace Gardens. The West Quarry has been reinstated (1990s) in line with the original picturesque concept as a picturesque landscape feature. This contrasts with the East Quarry, which retains the later, 'gardenesque' influences of Sir Arthur's planting.

To the north of the Quarry lie Belsay Castle, Manor House, and South Castle Field. The Castle and Manor House lie within a ha-ha with grazed paddocks beyond.

The walled kitchen garden (developed by Monck) lies directly to the north-west of the Hall and the Stables and retains its hot-wall and a significant number of early to mid C19 built features relating to the walled garden.

REFERENCES Note: There is a wealth of material about this site. The key references are cited below.

Country Life, 88 (5 October 1940), pp 301-3; (12 October 1940), pp 324-8; (19 October 1940), pp 346-50 G Darley, Villages of Vision (1975) Sir A E Middleton, An Account of Belsay Castle (1990) R Hewlings and S Anderton, Belsay Hall Garden and Castle, Northumberland, guidebook, (1994) The Garden 122, No 6 (1997), pp 418-23 Belsay Park: Survey, Landscape Assessment and Conservation Proposals, (Elizabeth Banks Associates 1998) Belsay Conservation Plan, (Elizabeth Banks Associates 1998)

Illustrations S and N Buck, The South View of Belso Castle, in Northumberland, 1728 (reproduced in Hewlings and Anderton 1994)

Archival items B Hackett, Some Northumberland Landscapes of the English School Pt II, (1972), pp 7-9 (ZM1.S.39), (Northumberland Record Office) The Middleton Papers are held at the Northumberland Record Office and include: Register of Trees and Shrubs in the Grounds of Belsay, 1852-4 (ZM1 S.36); Estate notes and J Robson Survey (ZM1 S.38-39, ZM1 S.70-72 including folders).

Description written: January 2001 Register Inspector: KC Edited: June 2003

Legal

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