

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

BELLE ISLE

Auteur(s) : Historic England <https://historicengland.org.uk/>

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BELLE ISLE

Name: BELLE ISLE

County: Cumbria

District: South Lakeland (District Authority)

Parish: Windermere

National park: LAKE DISTRICT

label.localisation: Latitude: 54.361723
Longitude: -2.9344398
National Grid Reference: SD 39377 96647
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden
Grade: II*
List Entry Number: 1000661
Date first listed: 01-Jul-1985

Details

A landscape designed by Thomas White for John Christian Curwen in the early 1780s, on an island site which had been improved by its previous owner, Thomas English, during the 1770s. The island is situated in the centre of Lake Windermere, at the heart of a late C18 centre for aesthetic tourism.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

During the 1770s the lake scenery of Cumberland and Westmorland became a popular attraction for tourists, aesthetes and painters. Lake Windermere, with Belle Isle, its largest island, was one of the principal attractions and it featured in late C18 guides to the area, including Thomas West's *Guide to the Lakes of 1778*, which commended 'the noble scenes of Poussin exhibited on Windermere-Water'. West recommended particular viewing points, or 'stations', for the best views. Five stations were recommended for Lake Windermere, including one each at the north and south ends of Belle Isle.

The island was bought by Thomas English in the 1770s who called it Long-Holme. He built a house on it and is said to have been influenced by his knowledge of the inhabited islands of the Italian lakes (Jacques 1983). The works he carried out cost c £6000 and attracted criticism from William Gilpin (1724-1804) who visited in 1772. In 1781 he sold the site to Isabella Curwen, whose husband, John Christian Curwen, renamed the island 'Belle Isle'. Crosthwaite's map of 1783 describes it simply as 'Windermere Island'. The island is in private ownership (1997).

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Belle Isle is situated slightly north of the centre of Lake Windermere. It is c 1.2km in length and of elongated form, running south-west/north-east, and occupies c 16ha.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES There is a landing stage on the east side of the island, c 200m north-west of Cockshott Point. Another landing stage is situated on the west side of the island, c 200m south-west of the first. Paths run from both to the house. Another landing stage, shown on both the large-scale OS map of 1857 and the 2nd edition of 1911, was situated on the east shore c 300m north of the house, connecting with the perimeter path around the island.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING

Belle Isle (listed grade I), also called Island House, is situated at the highest point of the island, close the centre of the southern half of the site. It was designed for Thomas English in 1774 by John Plaw and is thought to be the first cylindrical mansion to be built in England (Pevsner 1967). The neo-classical building is domed, with a lantern, and was sited to take advantage of views of the lake and lakeside. It is also considered to be the first building in the Lake District to be designed and sited for Picturesque reasons (Pevsner 1967). It is illustrated in the aquatint frontispiece to Plaw's *Rural Architecture of 1794* (reproduced in Andrews 1989) which shows the figure of Taste displaying the new house and its island setting to the figure of Rural Simplicity. Views of the island, lake, lake shores and mountains beyond are obtained from the house.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS There are lawns in the area around the house, some with late C20 beds, and c 40m north of the house there are tennis courts. Also to the north of the house is an area surrounded by a hornbeam hedge, formed during the late C20 for use as a kitchen garden. Planting around the house includes ornamental shrubs and exotic trees which were probably introduced during the late C19 or early C20. An illustration by John 'Warwick' Smith of 1791-5 shows that lawns swept up to the house at that time.

Paths from the building connect with a circumferential walk around the perimeter of the island, which is thickly planted with trees. This is shown on the 1st edition OS map surveyed 1858 and was laid out by Thomas White (1736-1811) for John Christian Curwen in the early 1780s. White prepared a plan of the improvements which shows planting around the island's perimeter, with the north and south ends more thickly planted than the remainder. There is a bank on the inner, island side of the walk, and in some areas along the side of the lake. Some of this banking may relate to work executed by Thomas English on the advice of William Gilpin who visited the island in 1772. The walk gives views, now partially obscured by mature planting, of the house, lake and lakeside. White's plan also shows three small circular buildings positioned around the island but there is no evidence that these were ever built.

The island interior consists of undulating grassland with rocky outcrops into which the perimeter planting has encroached. There has been late C20 infill planting of conifers so that the open appearance of the interior, evident on an aerial photograph of c 1960, has largely been lost. White's plan shows the interior of the island planted with scattered trees and clumps.

White was involved in developing and maintaining the landscape from 1783 until 1796. An analysis of estate accounts (Turnbull 1990) has shown that a payment of £2000 was made over the period 1783-6. A second contract dated 5 October 1784 was for the sum of £355, probably for additional works. White was then given a contract for 'keeping the improvements at Belle Isle in repair' for a period of ten years and the last payment for this was made in 1796.

KITCHEN GARDEN White's plan shows a large walled garden on the eastern side of the island, c 250m north-east of the house, but it is not known if this was executed and it is not shown on subsequent maps.

REFERENCES

Country Life, 88 (3 August 1940), pp 98-101; (10 August 1940), pp 120-4 N Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Cumberland and Westmorland* (1967), pp 228-9 D Jacques, *Georgian Gardens* (1983), p 117 M Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque* (1989), pp 4, 159-65 Belle Isle Windermere Estate Landscape Plan, (Woolerton Dodwell Associates 1997)

Maps P Crosthwaite, *An Accurate map of the Lake of Windermere being the largest in England, situate in Westmorland and Lancashire, 1783* T White, *Plan for improvements for Belle Isle, c 1783* (in Woolerton Dodwell Associates)

OS 6" to 1 mile: Westmorland sheet XXXII, 1st edition surveyed 1858 Westmorland sheet XXXII, surveyed 1858, revised 1911-12 with additions 1938 OS 25" to 1 mile: Westmorland sheet XXXII SE, 1st edition surveyed 1857-60

Archival items D Turnbull, *Thomas White (1739-1811): Eighteenth-Century Landscape Designer and Arboriculturist*, (unpub PhD thesis, Univ of Hull 1990), (quoted in Woolerton Dodwell Associates)

Description written: June 1998 Register Inspector: CEH Edited: March 1999

Legal

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