

Belsay Hall, Castle, Quarry and Gardens
Blue Sky Idea
Artist's Brief



Image of Belsay Hall by Keith Paisley © English Heritage

Introduction

This **Blue Sky Ideas** project is led by a group of volunteers from four important heritage sites located in the north east of England – Hadrian's Wall, Ushaw Historic House, Chapels and Gardens, Belsay Hall, Castle and Gardens, and Durham Cathedral. Funded by Newcastle University working in partnership with commissioning agency Arts&Heritage, the **Blue Sky Ideas** project invites artists working in all disciplines to respond to these sites with extraordinary, impossible and ambitious Ideas for **projects that cannot, in reality, be realised**. This is an unusual opportunity for artists to think imaginatively, fantastically, without the usual limitations of a commissioning brief. From initial Expressions of Interest, one idea per site will be selected to appear on the Arts&Heritage website and a fee of £500 be paid to the selected artists as well as profiling by Arts&Heritage.

Each site brief invites you to think ambitiously and present the Contemporary Art Volunteer Ambassadors with visionary, unorthodox transformations of the extraordinary sites they have chosen to support by volunteering. We hope that you enjoy considering these fantastic heritage sites and look forward to seeing what you might do with them!

Information about Belsay Hall, Castle, Quarry and Gardens

Belsay is a unique historical site in the heartland of Northumbria, 16 miles to the north of the City of Newcastle upon Tyne. It was the home of the Middleton family of Northumberland since 1107, until 1983. Belsay is now in the guardianship of English Heritage. Over the last 20 years the site has become an established location for contemporary art, attracting many artists, designers, performers and architects, including Mat Collishaw, Hew Locke, Paul Smith, Stella McCartney, Susan Philipsz, Mariele Neudecker and Ron Mueck.

It is rare to find at any historic site a collection of historic buildings with such diversity all within 30 minutes walking distance. A northern tower house, fourteenth century castle, Jacobean manor house, Georgian dower house and a neo-classical country house constructed in the style of a Greek Temple, all located on this site and spanning 800 years. The stone to build all of these buildings was quarried at Belsay in three defined periods (medieval, regency and Victorian) and connects the buildings into one visitor experience.

Belsay is an extraordinary historical site. Nestled within the Northumbrian landscape the Hall today presents an imposing, austere architectural presence. Its stark and empty interior hints at traces of inhabitation, allowing the visitor to imagine it functioning as a home. The grade one listed gardens range from formal terraces to wooded wilderness, with the Quarry gardens creating a microclimate within which rare plants can survive the northern weather. Today the quarry is the home of over 2000 trees, shrubs and plants creating the most magical gardens in the country at any time of the year. Plants from all over the world are seen here, collected mostly by Sir Charles Monck who built the Hall in 1817 and his grandson Sir Arthur Middleton, who developed the gardens and planting.

The castle was built by John de Middleton in 1307 as a fortified home employing 26 different stonemasons over 70 years, and it was during the following 300 years of anarchy in the north known as the "Border Reiver Period" that the castle became a place of refuge from the invading marauding Scots. In 1614 with the cessation of fighting and the union between the English and Scots, the family built a Jacobean house attached to the castle, the ruins of which can be seen today at Belsay. In the 1770s, Sir William Middleton constructed a Georgian Dower House which was burnt down in suspicious circumstances. It was Sir William that landscaped the estate in the style of Lancelot "Capability" Brown, introducing ha-ha walls, lakes and focal point features as well as introducing stables and a horse breeding program which was carried on by subsequent heirs.

Sir William's son, Sir Charles Miles Lambert Middleton inherited the Belsay Estate in 1795 at the age of 15. He became an extremely rich man as he inherited more wealth, land, property and coal mines in Lincolnshire, London and Kent. Sir Charles married Lady Louisa Lucia Cooke in 1804 and went on the Grand Tour, stopping off to study in Athens where the architecture of Greek temples influenced his thinking. On his return he designed and managed the construction of Belsay Hall in the style of a Greek Temple. It took 10 years to build and was completed by Christmas Eve 1817. The Hall has a cellar over a third of the size of the house and boasts excellent acoustics (previously commissioned artists have found that sound works extremely well here). Sir Charles's grandson, Sir Arthur Edward Middleton

inherited Belsay in 1876 and refurbished the Estate using rock from the Victorian quarry and introduced a substantial number of new rare plants, one of note is the rare *Davidia involucreata* – “Handkerchief Tree” acquired from China. The quarry provided an ideal growing climate for the plants due to the high temperature and shelter, and is a botanists’ paradise.

The Middleton family continued to live in the Hall providing a home and employment for over 60 servants up until the introduction of nationalisation and the outbreak of World War Two in the 1940s. Because of the war, and the Army’s requisition of the house during that time, the family suffered financially, and Sir Stephen Middleton had difficulties funding the upkeep of the estate. He organised two country house sales of the contents to generate income and in the end was left with the difficult decision of having to hand over the management of the historic site to the state in 1980, with the caveat that it should never be re-furnished and the rooms to remain empty. The reason for Sir Stephen’s decision continues to be one of speculation, but the general consensus is that he felt it could never return to the way it was at its heights. The Middleton Family continue to live on the estate surrounding the historic site and play an active part in the community

Key words or phrases

Reivers – Power – Change – Influence – Political – Mystery and Traces – Concealed – Greek – Classicism – Nature – Landscape – Picturesque and Romantic – Horses – Gardens – Castle – Quarry – Trees and Plants – Family – Servants – People wealth – Empty and austere

Who can apply

Professional visual artists, writers, performers, architects, designers, musicians who are working in all artistic mediums are encouraged to consider the briefs for Hadrian’s Wall, Ushaw Historic House, Chapels and Gardens, Belsay Hall, Castle, and Gardens and Durham Cathedral, and respond by describing what they would like to make at these sites if they had unlimited funds and no restraints set upon them (such as not touching the fabric of the building/landscape, planning issues etc.). Think big and outside of the box – these projects are truly Blue Sky and invite you to use your own individual creativity! We welcome responses from professional artists at any stage of their career.

What to do next

Send us your Idea. This needs to be a clear description of it (written or visual/sound etc) and why you have chosen to respond to a particular site. We are looking for Ideas that are site specific and we encourage you to seek out the unusual, the overlooked, the hidden and develop a project Idea that is ambitious yet rooted in the site’s location and context. As this stage is not funded, we are not expecting detailed proposals.

The details that we require from you are:

- Your name, contact details and website address if you have one
- A short paragraph about your practice (up to 250 words)

- Why you have chosen your site and what it is about it that interests you as an artist (up to 250 words)
- Your response outlining what you would do. This can include written word and/ or images, drawings, an audio file or a short film clip etc (up to 500 words: please do not feel you have to use all 500 words)
- Please send all of the above as one document / PDF when applying (with a second attachment if your application includes an audio / film file).

How we will select and present your work online

A steering group of nine volunteers who have completed a Newcastle University / Arts&Heritage project called *Volunteer Voices* will be considering all the responses, together with contemporary art curator and senior research associate Judith King. From the initial Ideas, four will be selected (one per historic site) and we will ask those artists for a little more information about themselves so that we can promote them via Arts&Heritage website and through social media. Each selected artist will receive £500. For previous examples of Blue Sky artistic Ideas please visit <https://www.artsandheritage.org.uk/blue-sky-museums/>

It is important to note that you don't have to have had experience of working within a heritage context; we are more interested in showcasing your ambitious and creative responses to the history and location of each of our historic sites. As the Ideas will be presented on the Arts&Heritage website, they should be able to be presented in a digital form. If selected, it is important that you agree to the proposal appearing on the website: this will mean we may not necessarily be able to protect your intellectual copyright, although Arts&Heritage respects that IP and copyright remains with the artist.

We hope that this project will allow the volunteers who have committed themselves enthusiastically to continuing their foray into the contemporary art world to experience the pleasure of seeing how artists can change the way of looking at history.

Deadline

Please email all responses to Becky Orwin at becky@artsandheritage.org.uk by 5pm, Friday 13 May 2022.

We will endeavour to let you know whether your Idea has been selected by 20 June 2022.



Belsay Castle (Photo: English Heritage)

Additional Information to assist the Artist - Belsay Hall, Castle, Quarry and Gardens

Artists will find a substantial amount of online information about the history of Belsay and the uniqueness of the site.

The below listed website links offer a good resource for further research:

<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/belsay-hall-castle-and-gardens/V>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belsay>

<https://www.visitnorthumberland.com/explore/things-to-do/attractions/historic-sites/belsay-hall-castle-and-gardens>

<https://www.facebook.com/belsayhall/>

<https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryMagazine/DestinationsUK/Belsay-Castle/>

<https://www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk/morpeth/belsayhall/index.html>

<https://www.parksandgardens.org/places/belsay-estate-quarry-garden>

<http://www.parish-council.com/belsayparish/index.asp?pageid=407977>

<https://www.historyhit.com/locations/belsay-hall-castle-and-gardens/>