

Belvoir Castle Conservation Area
Designated: October 1994
Designating Authority: Melton Borough Council
Area: 173.10 hectares

Introduction

Conservation Areas are 'areas of special architectural or historic interest, the character and appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance'. Designation of a conservation area recognises the character of an area worthy of preservation and enhancement and ensures the safeguarding of the best of our local heritage as represented by both buildings and the ambient environment, ie: the spaces between and around buildings when viewed as a whole. Local Planning Authorities have a general duty to pay special attention to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character and appearance of conservation areas, consequently there are more stringent planning controls and obligations in respect of new development, demolitions, alterations, highway works and advertisements.

Conservation Area status is not just about the attractive areas of settlements. In some instances, areas, which either contribute little, or are even detrimental to the character of the Conservation Area, are included within the boundary because of their potential for enhancement. Conservation Area status does not mean that new development may not take place but must reflect the local architectural vernacular in scale, siting, massing, details and materials. Special attention should be paid to not only building form but also fenestration and materials.

A Character Appraisal is seen as the best method of defining the key elements that contribute to that special historic and architectural character of an area. It is important that all interested parties are aware of those elements that must be preserved or enhanced. It is intended that the character appraisals will guide the local planning authority in making planning decisions and, where opportunities arise, preparing enhancement schemes. It will be a material consideration when considering applications for development within the conservation area.

Location and Context

Belvoir Castle is the fourth to have stood on the site since Norman Times. The existing Castle was completed in the early 19th Century after previous buildings suffered complete or partial destruction during the Wars of the Roses, the Civil War and a major fire in 1816. It sits within a vast estate of almost 30,000 acres (120 km²). The estate is open to the public and offers a range of outdoor activities.

Belvoir, meaning beautiful view in French, dates back to Norman Times. The English pronunciation 'Beaver' was built up over many centuries through the inability of Anglo-Saxons to master the French tongue. Belvoir has been the ancestral home of the Duke and Duchess of Rutland for one thousand years and is currently the family home of the 11th Duke and Duchess and their five children.

Belvoir comprises two farm complexes and a small number of agricultural cottages and stable blocks adjacent to the castle. The castle occupies a commanding position at the north eastern end of the Vale of Belvoir escarpment with spectacular view across the vale to the north and is set within a huge swathe of trees and formal landscaped gardens with two lakes. From within the Castle grounds there are also intimate and distance views through woodland areas of the Castle and other important buildings. The designed elements and the landscape in particular providing and enhancing those views.

Conservation Area Boundary

The conservation area boundary encompasses the Castle, Belvoir Lodge to the north and the Belvoir hunt stables to the south-east of the Castle, and is the second largest conservation area in the Borough. The majority of the Conservation boundary falls within an Historic Park and Garden.

Spatial Character and Quality

Belvoir Castle, its associated outbuildings and the extensive grounds within which they are situated naturally all inter-relate with each other to provide a unique setting and contribute to the character and nature of the Conservation Area. However, as this large Conservation Area is predominantly rural in nature its contributory elements can best be described as nine separate sub areas.

The Castle - The modern day Belvoir Castle is built of ironstone with limestone dressings and slate roofs. The original building was built as a Norman castle in approximately 1070 by Robert de Todeni (who was William the Conqueror's standard bearer at the Battle of Hastings) and almost certainly had a large central square stone-built keep, with a surrounding stone wall. This castle lasted for almost four hundred years. In 1464 the castle was demolished during the Wars of the Roses and lay in ruin for sixty years.

The work to build a second castle commenced in the reign of Henry VIII by the Manners family. This was a heavily fortified medieval building and stood for about one hundred and twenty years until the upheaval of the Civil War between Charles I and Parliament. Once the Civil War was over the Earl of Rutland began the re-building, creating a very fine mansion in the classical style on the castle site – an enormous house with four wings around a central rectangular courtyard. This third castle survived for about one hundred and forty years.

In 1799 the fifth Duke of Rutland, then aged 21, married 20 year old Elizabeth Howard from Castle Howard in Yorkshire and she preferred to have a more traditional castle with towers, turrets and battlements; and so in the next thirty years the previous castle was rebuilt to the very fine Gothic Revival Castle that stands there today looking towards Woolsthorpe village and Nottingham beyond.

The modern-day grade I listed castle, in its elevated location overlooking the Vale of Belvoir, is a magnificent building consisting of many gothic towers, battlements, turrets, chimneys and balconies in a romantic mixed gothic style with crenellated parapets. The windows are mainly upright cross casements and substantial medieval masonry still exists within the lower storeys.

The Stable Blocks and Associated Housing - To the north-east of the castle situated at a much lower level are a collection of virtually unchanged stone stables and associated buildings with Swithland or Welsh slate roofs. They were completed in 1668 to a design by John Webb. More recently, several have been sympathetically converted into living and office accommodation. The Old Bakehouse and Brewery Row have Swithland slate roofs and all the buildings have substantial chimney stacks and are grade II listed.

The stable area is dominated by the grade II* listed circular exercise ring within the stable courtyard. This building, when used, could exercise up to twenty horses at any one time with riders feeling no dizziness. There is an unspoilt cobbled area around the exercise ring and mounting block; the whole area is reminiscent of a Cotswold village with stone, brick and cobbles evoking its rich equestrian heritage.

Belvoir Hunt Kennels - The grade II listed kennels date from 1802 and are located to the south-east of the castle. The complex consists of four symmetrical brick built compounds with wooden railings surrounding a square central block with an octagonal turret. The four compounds were built to house four separate packs of hounds. There are many associated outbuildings and two dwelling houses within the site. Adjacent to the kennels, a grade II listed bridge spans the upper and lower lakes, which together with kennel wood, adds to this beautiful and tranquil location.

Garden House and Walled Gardens - The Gardener's House and walled gardens to the Castle are located to the east of the Castle and are grade II listed. The house was constructed in the mid nineteenth century and is rendered, probably over ironstone with an attractive trellis porch and slate roof. The grade II listed and formerly heated walled gardens are very striking, benefiting from four main entrances each marked by a limestone arch between polygonal turrets.

The Engine Yard - Engine Yard comprises a complex of predominantly industrial buildings situated to the west of the Castle on land which slopes away into the Vale of Belvoir. The site comprises a range of single, two and three storey brick buildings under a mix of tile and slate roofs together with a two storey brick and slate dwelling.

The Engine Yard was constructed in approximately 1850 and none of the buildings are listed. Originally the complex included a sawmill, wagon making shop, wheelwright's shop and other associated activities. There is a forge in what is now the plumber's shop. The engine, housed in its own building, powered the sawmill machinery via a system of pulleys and belts.

A narrow gauge tramway was constructed to a 4 foot 4 inch gauge in order to transport commodities up to the castle. The tramway was a very 'modern' design for its time, in as much as the flanges were on the wagon wheels rather than the track. It was not completed until 1815, and had a useful life of just over 100 years, ceasing to operate around 1918. Sections of the track are still evident within the castle grounds.

Power House Cottages - These cottages were formerly the electricity supply house and transformer room for the Castle and Estate Office and were converted into housing during the 1950's.

Belvoir Lodge and the Old Courthouse - Belvoir Lodge lies to the north of the Castle – a substantial stone, brick and slate roofed property. Adjacent is the grade II listed Courthouse a seventeenth century building, now sadly disused. This has a Swithland slate gabled roof and is constructed in ironstone with some limestone.

The Dairy House - now privately owned, this grade II listed property was previously the dairy, constructed, probably by James Wyatt circa 1810. It is coloured washed in pink, probably over ironstone and has slate roofs. There is a central octagonal block with a three bay open loggia to the front and is in a very eye-catching position in the shadow of the castle overlooking open countryside and framed by trees in the foreground.

Ice House and the Mausoleum - Both these buildings are grade II listed – the ice house having been constructed in brick around 1830 and the mausoleum in limestone in 1826 by Benjamin and Philip Wyatt. There are spectacular views of the castle from the mausoleum overlooking a wooded valley.

Quality and Character of Buildings

The buildings within the conservation area for Belvoir Castle are, as expected, of the finest quality and are generally unspoilt. Most of the buildings are grade II listed and the Castle is worthy of its grade I listing.

Natural Elements

The grounds of the castle are substantially semi-natural broadleaved woodland traversed by various pathways and tracks. Briery Wood is notified as being a site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) simply because it contains the largest heronry in Leicestershire with up to thirty breeding pairs.

Extensive areas of the grounds are registered as an Historic Park and Garden and the description notes that they have a highly elaborate formal scheme surrounded by trees and woodland. Capability Brown was consulted on the landscaping in 1780, but his proposals were not executed.

The castle grounds include a beautiful rose and statue garden, pet cemetery garden and newly developed Japanese garden. Part of ongoing restoration is a new woodland path which leads down to the Duchess's garden. This is a fine example of a Victorian valley garden, with many rare species of trees and an Edwardian daffodil collection, planted sympathetically with primroses and bluebells against a background of rhododendrons and azaleas.

The gardens were designed to show off the crenellated castle at its best and include acres of grass, fine trees and flowers. Within the immediate grounds there are three sculptures of Greek or Roman goddesses and statues representing spring, summer, autumn and winter all by Caius Gabriel Cibber and dated around 1680. These are all grade II* listed.

Within the grounds are two grade II listed summerhouses (known as roothouses) both built circa 1810. They are very unusual in being of rustic design and constructed with tree branches with thatched roofs. One has a magnificent 'curtain drapery' effect carved from branches.

Negative factors

Maintenance on an Estate of this size is an onerous task and there are several buildings that would benefit from repair and restoration.

For further help and advice please contact:

*The Regulatory Services Section
Melton Borough Council
Council Offices
Nottingham Road
Melton Mowbray
Leicestershire LE13 0UL
Telephone; 01664 502502*

The Council has also prepared a leaflet entitled 'A Guide to Conservation Areas' which gives general advice. Copies are available from the Physical Environment Section as detailed above.

The above is an appraisal of the Belvoir Castle Conservation Area, which highlights the most significant factors that make it worthy of Conservation status. The omission of any particular building, feature or space should not be taken to apply that it is of no interest.