

Belle Isle: Justification for inclusion within the Windermere Villas Conservation Area

Statutory and Policy Context

1. Conservation Areas are designated to recognise areas of special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance. Section 69 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 places a statutory duty on local planning authorities to identify and designate such areas:
“(1) Every local planning authority—
(a) shall from time to time determine which parts of their area are areas of special architectural or historic interest the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance, and
(b) shall designate those areas as conservation areas.”
2. Paragraph 204 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) advises that, in designating Conservation Areas, local planning authorities should ensure that an area justifies such status because of its special architectural or historic interest, and that the concept of conservation is not weakened through the designation of areas that lack such interest.
3. Historic England's 'Conservation Area Appraisal, Designation and Management' guidance (2019) emphasises that Conservation Area designation should be informed by a clear understanding of an area's **special interest**, including architectural, historic, aesthetic and associative values, as well as group value, setting, views, and landscape context. The guidance also makes clear that vulnerability or perceived threat may prompt consideration of designation but cannot be the primary justification for inclusion or for the delineation of boundaries; these must be driven by the presence and coherence of special interest.

Designation Context and Rationale

4. Belle Isle is a Grade I listed building and lies within a Grade II* Registered Park and Garden. These designations provide a high level of statutory protection, and there are no identified risks to its ongoing conservation. Its inclusion within the Windermere Villas Conservation Area is therefore not based on vulnerability, but on its **exceptional historic, architectural, landscape and associative significance**, and its fundamental role in shaping the development of the Lake District villa tradition.
5. Historic England guidance recognises that Conservation Areas frequently encompass a high proportion of listed buildings, reflecting the survival of nationally important heritage assets within coherent historic environments. Designation recognises not only individual assets, but also their **group value**, spatial relationships, landscape setting, views and cumulative significance.
6. The village of Hawkshead provides a relevant comparator. Within a compact area it contains 42 listed buildings, including the Grade I listed Church of St Michael and All Angels. The special interest of Hawkshead derives from the collective value of its buildings, historic development pattern, and public realm, rather than from the vulnerability of individual assets. This principle applies equally to Belle Isle.

Historic Development and Architectural Significance

7. The island now known as Belle Isle has been occupied since at least the 13th century. The villa designed by John Plaw for Thomas English, together with its naturalistic parkland landscape, represents one of the earliest examples of an 18th-century villa set within a lake landscape in England.
8. During the 1770s, the rugged, mountainous scenery of Cumberland and Westmorland became an important destination for tourists, aesthetes and artists. Lake Windermere, with Belle Isle as its largest island, was among the principal attractions and featured prominently in contemporary guidebooks,

including Thomas West's *Guide to the Lakes* (1778), which praised "the noble scenes of Poussin exhibited on Windermere-Water". West identified specific viewpoints or 'stations' from which the landscape should be appreciated; five were identified for Lake Windermere, including viewpoints at both the northern and southern ends of Belle Isle.

9. Belle Isle (also known as Island House) occupies the highest point of the island, near the centre of its southern half. Designed by John Plaw, it is believed to be the first cylindrical mansion built in England (Pevsner, 1967). The neo-classical building, with its domed roof and lantern, was deliberately sited to exploit panoramic views of the lake and surrounding landscape. It is also considered to be the first building in the Lake District designed and positioned explicitly for Picturesque effect (Pevsner, 1967).

10. The villa was illustrated in the aquatint frontispiece to Plaw's *Rural Architecture* (1794), which depicts the figure of Taste presenting the house and its island setting to Rural Simplicity. Views of the island, lake, surrounding shores and distant mountains are integral to the significance of the building.

Group Value, Setting and Influence

11. Although relatively small in scale, Belle Isle is set within a naturalistic parkland landscape and served as a prototype for later villas. Of exceptional architectural interest for its unique rotunda form and prominent island setting, the Grade I listed building represents the earliest phase of villa construction in the Lake District and directly influenced the subsequent development of villas along the shores of Windermere and elsewhere.

12. Its picturesque siting informed the construction of Derwent Island House, reportedly designed by Pocklington himself and accompanied by ornamental buildings, a mock castle and stone circle. Together, these two buildings initiated a wider debate on the appropriateness of private architectural

intervention within the Lake District landscape. William Wordsworth described Belle Isle as “the first house that was built in the English Lake District for the sake of the beauty of the country”.

13. Belle Isle represents a clear shift away from the vernacular building traditions which prevailed in the Lake District throughout the 18th century, of siting buildings with regards to topography, orientation and prevailing weather. Earlier grand houses built before the villa movement, such as Rayrigg Hall and Calgarth Hall, whilst sited close to the lake, were set back at some distant to be above the lakeshore, with their principal elevations facing south and rear service wings facing north – a continuation of the well-established vernacular practice of utilising solar gain for living areas and keeping service wings, pantry and buttery etc to the north, avoiding the effects of solar gain. The idea of siting a house directly adjacent to the lake shore, positioned to take advantage of views and not with regards to prevailing weather, would have seemed highly unusual and impractical to Lake District builders of the 17th and 18th centuries.
14. Whilst the island setting of Belle Isle could not be replicated by subsequent villas, the siting of buildings for picturesque effect, maximising views of the lake and the mountainous backdrop, with a mixture of formal and naturalistic grounds could, and indeed was, emulated by the developments which followed throughout the 19th century and into the 20th century.
15. The development of the eastern shore of Windermere is a continuation of the picturesque ideals first exhibited at Belle Isle in which the lakeshore location, panoramic views of rugged mountains and designed landscape setting replace earlier vernacular building traditions.

16. Public reaction to this move away from the vernacular was not always positive. The novel creations at Belle Isle and Derwent Island aroused considerable interest among visitors during the 1770s and 1780s, inaugurating a pattern of public—and often outspoken—commentary on private development within the Lake District landscape that continues to resonate today, no more so than on the highly visible lakeshore areas.

17. Although villa construction was limited during the 1780s, it increased significantly from the 1790s onwards, particularly as the European Tour became less accessible. The early development of villas and designed landscapes around Lake Windermere and on its islands has resulted in one of the most important picturesque landscapes in Europe.

World Heritage Site Context and Outstanding Universal Value

18. Belle Isle lies within the English Lake District World Heritage Site, inscribed for its Outstanding Universal Value as a cultural landscape shaped by aesthetic appreciation and artistic engagement. The Statement of Outstanding Universal Value recognises the Lake District as a landscape that inspired the Picturesque movement and later Romantic ideals, where deliberate human interventions were designed to heighten scenic beauty and visual experience.

19. Belle Isle makes a direct and tangible contribution to this Outstanding Universal Value. As the earliest purpose-built Picturesque villa in the Lake District, consciously designed and sited to be viewed from multiple vantage points and celebrated in contemporary literature and art, it exemplifies the deliberate shaping of landscape for aesthetic purposes. Its visibility from both eastern and western shores, from Cockshott Point, Claife Station and the Windermere Ferry, ensures that it remains a prominent and legible feature in key designed and associative views across the Windermere Valley.

Conclusion

20. In accordance with Section 69 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, paragraph 204 of the NPPF, and Historic England guidance, the inclusion of Belle Isle within the Windermere Villas Conservation Area is fully justified by its exceptional special architectural and historic interest, its group value with other early villas, its landmark presence within the landscape, and its profound influence on the development of the Picturesque Lake District. Its inclusion strengthens the coherence and understanding of the Conservation Area and reinforces the articulation of the English Lake District World Heritage Site's Outstanding Universal Value.

Belle Isle: Conservation Area Appraisal Addendum

1. Assessment of Special Interest

(Aligned with Historic England, Conservation Area Appraisal, Designation and Management, 2019)

Historic England guidance advises that Conservation Area Appraisals should clearly identify and describe the elements that contribute to an area's special architectural and historic interest, including architectural quality, historic development, landscape context, setting, views, group value, and associative significance.

Belle Isle demonstrates exceptional special interest across all of these criteria.

Architectural Interest

Belle Isle (Grade I listed), designed in 1773-74 to designs by John Plaw for Thomas English, is believed to be the first cylindrical mansion constructed in England. The neo-classical villa, with its domed roof and lantern, represents a highly innovative architectural form and an early and influential example of Picturesque design. It is also recognised as the first building in the Lake District to be consciously designed and sited for Picturesque effect.

Historic Interest

The island has been occupied since at least the 13th century. The construction of Belle Isle marks a pivotal moment in the history of the Lake District, representing the emergence of the villa as a new building type explicitly associated with aesthetic appreciation of landscape. The villa was widely celebrated in contemporary literature and guidebooks, including Thomas West's *Guide to the Lakes* (1778), which praised "the noble scenes of Poussin exhibited on Windermere-Water" and identified Belle Isle as a key feature in recommended viewing 'stations'.

Landscape and Aesthetic Value

Set within a naturalistic parkland landscape, Belle Isle occupies the highest point of the island and commands extensive views across Lake Windermere and the surrounding fells. Its siting and design deliberately exploit these views and contribute to the scenic composition of the Windermere Valley. The villa is illustrated in the aquatint frontispiece to Plaw's *Rural Architecture* (1794), reproduced in Andrews

(1989), symbolically presenting the house and its island setting as an embodiment of aesthetic 'Taste'.

Associative Value

Belle Isle is strongly associated with key figures in the development of the Picturesque and Romantic appreciation of landscape. William Wordsworth described it as "the first house that was built in the English Lake District for the sake of the beauty of the country". Along with Joseph Pocklington's Derwent Island House, Belle Isle generated significant contemporary debate regarding private development within the Lake District landscape, inaugurating a tradition of public commentary that remains relevant to the area's cultural identity and conservation area status.

Group Value and Influence

Although physically separated from the shoreline, Belle Isle has strong group value with other early villas around Lake Windermere and beyond. Although its rotunda design was never copied, it served as a prototype for later classical villas in the Windermere Valley and wider Lake District. Together, these early villas established a pattern of architectural and landscape intervention that shaped the evolution of the Lake District as a consciously designed picturesque landscape.

2. Contribution to the Character and Appearance of the Conservation Area

(Summary for Appraisal and Management Purposes)

Belle Isle makes a profound contribution to the character and appearance of the Windermere Villas Conservation Area through the following attributes:

- **Landmark Quality:** A visually dominant and iconic feature within Lake Windermere, readily identifiable from both eastern and western shores.
- **Designed Views and Visibility:** Prominently visible from Cockshott Point, Claife Station, the Windermere Ferry and historic viewing 'stations', reinforcing its role in the scenic composition of the lake.
- **Architectural Innovation:** A unique rotunda form of exceptional architectural quality, representing the earliest phase of villa design in the Lake District.
- **Landscape Integration:** Harmoniously set within a naturalistic parkland landscape that enhances its aesthetic and picturesque qualities.

- **Historic Catalyst:** The first Lake District villa, directly influencing later villa construction and the development of designed landscapes around Windermere and elsewhere.
- **Associative and Literary Significance:** Closely linked to influential figures such as John Plaw, Thomas West and William Wordsworth, and to the early articulation of Picturesque and Romantic ideals.
- **World Heritage Contribution:** A tangible expression of the aesthetic values that underpin the Outstanding Universal Value of the English Lake District World Heritage Site.

3. Boundary Justification: Inclusion of Belle Isle

(Addressing Physical Separation from the Shoreline)

Historic England guidance recognises that Conservation Area boundaries should be drawn to include areas that share a demonstrable and coherent special interest, even where physical separation exists, provided that functional, visual, historical or associative relationships are clear.

Although Belle Isle is geographically detached from the lakeshore, its inclusion within the Windermere Villas Conservation Area is fully justified by its exceptional special interest and its integral relationship with the surrounding landscape and villa development.

Belle Isle was deliberately designed to be seen from the shoreline and from multiple viewpoints around Lake Windermere, including historically recognised viewing 'stations'. Its visual presence remains a defining element of views across the Windermere Valley and contributes directly to the character and appearance of the lakeshore environment. The villa's architectural form, picturesque siting, and historic function are inseparable from the experience of Windermere as a designed landscape.

Furthermore, Belle Isle is the earliest and most influential example of villa development in the Lake District, acting as the catalyst for subsequent villas along the lakeshore and further afield. Its inclusion ensures that the Conservation Area fully encompasses the origins, evolution and significance of the Windermere villa tradition, rather than presenting a fragmented or incomplete narrative.

In World Heritage terms, Belle Isle contributes directly to the Outstanding Universal Value of the English Lake District as a cultural landscape shaped by aesthetic appreciation and artistic engagement. Its deliberate design, prominent visibility and influential role in the Picturesque movement embody the attributes for which the World Heritage Site was inscribed. Exclusion of Belle Isle would undermine the legibility and coherence of both the Conservation Area and the articulation of OUV within the Windermere Valley.

Summary

In accordance with Section 69 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, paragraph 204 of the NPPF, Historic England guidance, and the Statement of Outstanding Universal Value for the English Lake District World Heritage Site, Belle Isle is of exceptional special architectural and historic interest. Its inclusion within the Windermere Villas Conservation Area is essential to understanding the area's character, origins and international significance.

Belle Isle: Evolution of its consideration for inclusion within the Conservation Area

Given the nature of the property, its designated status and international significance, the inclusion of Belle Isle within the Conservation Area was discussed at the outset with the consultants appointed to prepare the Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plan. The architectural and historic significance of the site, its contribution to the World Heritage Site and Lake District villa legacy, along with the level of protection already afforded by Listed Building and Registered Park and Garden designations, and the lack of perceived risk, were all considered as factors both for and against its inclusion. Ultimately the proposed boundary put forward by the consultants was for a continuous area of land on the eastern shore, with Belle Isle within the setting of the Conservation Area but not within its boundary.

We sought feedback on the initial proposed boundary and there were some key points that came out of this consultation – the lack of special architectural and historic interest of the built environments of the Marina Village and The Glebe, and the importance of including Belle Isle in a Conservation Area that is focussed on an evolved villa landscape. The inclusion of Belle Isle was put forward by a range of consultees – Parish Councils, The National Trust and members of the public.

Public consultation is key to ensuring that our proposals are robust, well evidenced and take account of the range of views of key partners, stakeholders and members of the public. We have taken onboard the feedback received and reviewed the proposed boundary, removing Windermere Marina Village, The Glebe and Cockshott Wood, as the feedback rightly set out the lack of special interest in these areas to warrant inclusion within the Conservation Area. These areas would form part of the setting of the new Conservation Area, and any development would need to have due regard to its impact on the setting of the existing Bowness Conservation Area and, if designated, the Windermere Villas Conservation Area, as well as the setting of any other designated heritage assets.

The inclusion of Belle Isle within the Conservation Area came out strongly in the public consultation and we are duty bound to consider this feedback and revise the proposed plans accordingly.

A key factor in the revised proposed boundary was the clarification that a continuous boundary was not necessary. This allowed for Windermere Marina Village and The Glebe to be omitted, and for Rectory Farm and Belle Isle to be included – resulting in a Conservation Area of three separate land parcels.

The implications of inclusion within the Conservation Area may be of benefit to Belle Isle – adding an extra layer of protection for important trees alongside the Listed Building and Registered Park and Garden designations and increasing the awareness and consideration of the setting of both Belle Isle and the wider conservation area when assessing new development proposals along the Glebe or Bowness Bay and on the Western Shore. The only additional burden of Conservation Area status for Belle Isle would be the need to submit prior notifications for any tree works above the defined size (75mm at 1.5m height).