



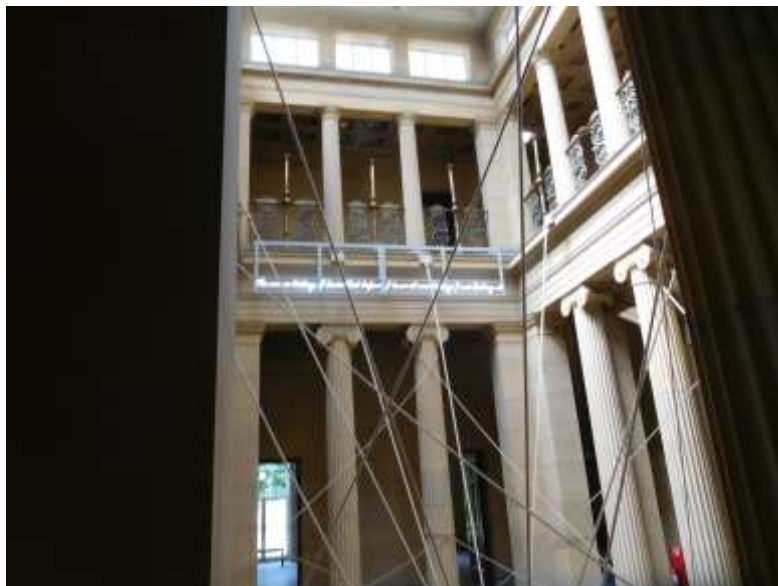
Belsay Hall visit

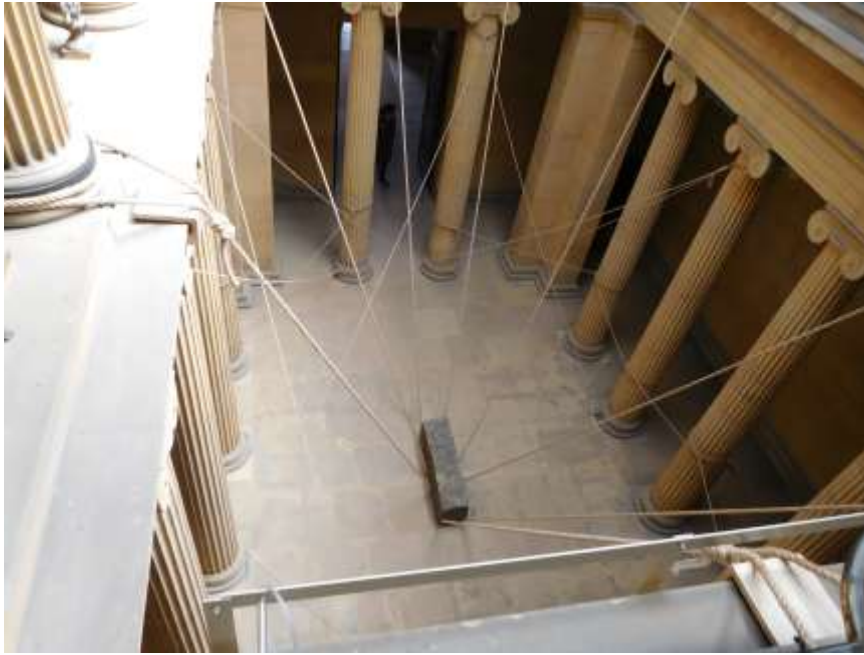
About 30 members and guests visited Belsay Hall, near Morpeth, Northumberland, on Saturday 8 June 2024. This was a new venture for the Club, with a subsidised coach from Berwick, to see whether it would attract those who could not attend weekday visits.

Belsay Hall is in the care of English Heritage, although the wider estate of which it is the centrepiece is still owned by the Middleton family, who have been the owners almost without interruption since the thirteenth century. It comprises three parts: the fourteenth-century castle, which consists of a most impressive fortified tower, with corbelled bartizans, and a mansion house adjoining; a Greek Revival Hall built from 1807 to 1817 for Sir Charles Monck (who had changed his name from Middleton in order to inherit his grandfather's Lincolnshire estates); and the Quarry Garden (also created by Sir Charles Monck) which connects the two buildings on the site of the quarry which had provided the sandstone blocks for the construction of the Hall. It has a microclimate which allows the growth of tender species which do not often thrive elsewhere in the north east. It is regarded as one of the finest examples of the Picturesque style of landscape gardens in the country. Sir Charles's grandson, Sir Arthur Middleton, enhanced the plants in the Quarry Garden with colourful and exotic species. There is also an abundance of ferns, including a large Chusan palm.



The Hall itself is an unfurnished shell. Its principal feature is the central two-storey Pillar Hall, which gives the impression of a classical temple. At the time of our visit, it contained an art installation by Ingrid Pollard. It is a masterpiece of the Greek Revival style, and was inspired by the long honeymoon which Sir Charles Monck and his wife Louisa spent in Greece in 1805. It has been beautifully cleaned and restored in the recent Lottery project undertaken by English Heritage.





This was not a guided tour; members made their own way around. The weather was sunny, although windy. English Heritage have spent a lot of money, through a Lottery grant, not only on building maintenance and garden upkeep, but also on signage and interpretation panels. There is a striking audiovisual animation in the castle, projected on to a wall, on the history of the estate. It features the wild man, a heraldic supporter of the Middletons' coat of arms. This mythical medieval figure is a motif which recurs frequently in signage around the site, as a way of engaging the interest of children. The public are allowed access to parts of the castle roof, which gives wonderful vistas of the surrounding countryside.

Altogether it was a successful day, although the bus had to return to Berwick after dropping the group off, and was late in picking people up. Fortunately, the good weather lasted and everyone was understanding about it. The English Heritage staff were friendly and helpful. It is to be hoped that this will be the first in a series of occasional Saturday events for the Club.