

MBL Projects

The Boathouse, Belton House, Lincolnshire

National Trust article: 'Belton's Baffling Boathouse'

"The boathouse is amongst the most delightful of building types, and one which has a special place in the affections of an island race. Boathouses are found in a variety of forms which signal their function: the lifeboat house, perched at the top of a vertiginous launching ramp; the collegiate boathouse, serene, with proud façade affording accommodation for its sleek cargo of eights and sculls and other boathouses, some fanciful, some little more than sheds found at the bottom of gardens or on lazy rivers.

But there is another category of boathouse, once plentiful, that are now surprisingly few in number. The landscape parks of the great majority of 18th and 19th century country houses contained water, and the margins of their lakes and rivers – whether natural or artificial – provided the ideal setting for the boathouse. Practical needs and aesthetic aspirations could be served simultaneously. The primary purpose of the boathouse was for the docking and storage of boats, usually light skiffs or punts, but this was often combined with other functions including fishing, picnicking, bathing and even ice-skating.

During the 1820s Lord Brownlow of Belton House commissioned a young architect, Anthony Salvin, to design a boathouse in the grounds. This was to act as the centrepiece of an extension of the Pleasure Grounds eastwards. Planting of shrubs and yew was undertaken, walks were laid out around the lakes and a miniature cascade of boulders was constructed at the outfall of the lower lake. During this time, Salvin's Tudor gothic lead-latticed and basket-weave boathouse was built, closely following the design drawings, which survive at Belton and are dated 1821.

The building acted as focal point for this outer part of the garden and for expeditions from the house. Salvin's drawings indicated that the main chamber was designed as a 'Fishing Room', whilst the projecting rustic balcony provided shelter. The latter arrangement was far from ideal as it meant boaters had to wade into the water to retrieve the craft, a strange omission on a boathouse. Steps leading down to the water from either side of the gallery were pencilled in on the plan as a clear afterthought. As a later amateur watercolour shows, the idea of mooring the boat beneath the gallery may have been abandoned altogether, for a thatched boat-shelter was built a few yards away along the same bank. A fireplace, inserted later, provided comfort for tea parties with gallery views of the lake, outlying parkland, and the hilltop eye catcher 'Bellmount'.

This rare little building has enjoyed a quiet history of occasional use in the 19th century followed by slow decline in the 20th. Having suffered from water ingress the National Trust worked with architect Nick Cox and Bowmans to repair the fabric of the building. Among the many challenges was repairing the basket-weave plasterwork and the stonefish scale roof.

Its rescue was completed during 2008, not only for its own intrinsic merits as a charming and important early documented work by Salvin, but also as a focal point across the lake which visitors can enjoy."