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Curiously CONCHHOLOGICAL

Quirky and enchanting, shell houses and grottoes have captivated generations of pleasure seekers with their mysterious charm

FEATURE SARAH BLAKE

Shells are an intriguing contradiction. They are naturally formed, yet are perfectly proportioned and often as symmetrical as a mathematician's diagram. They are created as tough outer casings to protect marine creatures from the perils of the sea, but once washed up on the beach, they become exquisitely decorative and fragile. Like precious stones, they are nature's jewels, yet unlike diamonds or rubies, they can be picked up freely on the shoreline. All the same, to a creative eye, shells are precious. With their delicate whorls of shape and colour, they have long inspired artists, designers and decorators to produce some of the most magical structures found in the landscape, in the form of shell houses and grottoes.

Shells have featured as a decorative motif since the Renaissance, but their decorative origins go back much further, to the pagan temples of Greece and Rome. Artificial caverns decorated with shellwork were designed as shrines to water nymphs, as well as gods and goddesses linked to the sea, such as Neptune and Venus. With the advent of Christianity, the tradition of shell shrines was adapted to the worship of important holy figures, such as the Virgin Mary and St James of Compostela. However, it was in 16th-century Italy that the Renaissance fascination with classical civilisations brought decorative shellwork back into fashion, to be used this time in rather more domestic and secular settings. Shell grottoes were no longer shrines, but instead became beautiful caverns of delight, designed to fascinate onlookers with their complex, decorative patterns and mysterious, winding passageways.



SHELLWORK IN BRITAIN

Although shell grottoes initially gained popularity on the Continent, by the 17th century the first designs had started to appear in Britain. This was largely due to two brothers, Salomon and Isaac de Caus, French landscape artists who transformed some of the most beautiful English parklands. Their speciality was elaborate water gardens that included cascades and fountains, as well as small surprise features, such as trick water spouts and hidden ➤

1 A grotto dining room in London, designed by Belinda Eade in 1990. The walls are decorated with English shells, including cockles, mussels and oyster shells. The central pillar is knapped flint and the arches are tufa stone.

2 The patterned floor of the Shell House at Goodwood is made from horses' teeth, giving a hard surface. At the back, the mirror is positioned to reflect Chichester Cathedral.



shell grottoes. Isaac de Caus created grottoes for many illustrious patrons, including the Earl of Pembroke at Wilton House and the Duke of Bedford at Woburn Abbey, but his most important commission came from the royal court. In 1623, James I commissioned him to install a private shell grotto in the cellars of the Banqueting House, where the King could carouse in style – and secrecy – with his circle. Having received the royal seal of approval, shell schemes quickly became the last word in fashion.

With the exception of the shell room at Woburn, which can still be viewed today, few early examples of grotto work remain to be seen, but there are still several 18th-century grottoes that have survived. One of the most well-preserved is at Goldney Hall, near Bristol, where over 200 types of shell have been combined with coral, quartz crystal and other minerals to create a sparkling underground cavern.

The Goldney grotto contained a statue of a maritime god, as did many grottoes built in the same era, as a reference to their original function as pagan shrines. However, the Georgian grottoes were designed with far less solemn purposes in mind – the Hampton Court House grotto in Middlesex was commissioned by the Earl of Halifax as a trysting place, where he could secretly meet his lover, the opera singer Anna Maria Donaldson. Although most grottoes weren't put to such a passionate purpose, many were used for picnics and tea-drinking, or late-night revelries when, illuminated with candle sconces or flaming torches, they possessed an atmospheric – if slightly eerie – allure.

By the middle of the 18th century, the craze for grottoes and shell rooms was reaching its zenith. Rivalry to produce the most impressive scheme was fierce, and the ninth Earl of Lincoln spent over £40,000 on a two-storey shell house, complete with sitting room. Once infected with grotto fever, many owners were unwilling to complete the task they had started – the poet Alexander Pope spent 24 years designing, building and remodelling his grotto at Twickenham and continued to work on it up until his death in 1744. However, for most of fashionable society, owning a grotto was just another way of displaying one's wealth and taste.

LADIES' PASTIME

Shellwork was seen as a refined hobby for ladies, and several of the best examples were produced by aristocratic women. The Duchess of Portland was a

SHELL ROOMS AND GROTTOES TO VISIT

GOLDNEY HALL GROTTO, Bristol, 01179 034880. Part of an exquisite 18th-century formal garden, it now belongs to Bristol University, but is open to the public on certain days.

LEEDS CASTLE GROTTO, near Maidstone, Kent, 01622 765400, leeds-castle.com. A magical modern design, which proves the art of grotto making still flourishes today.

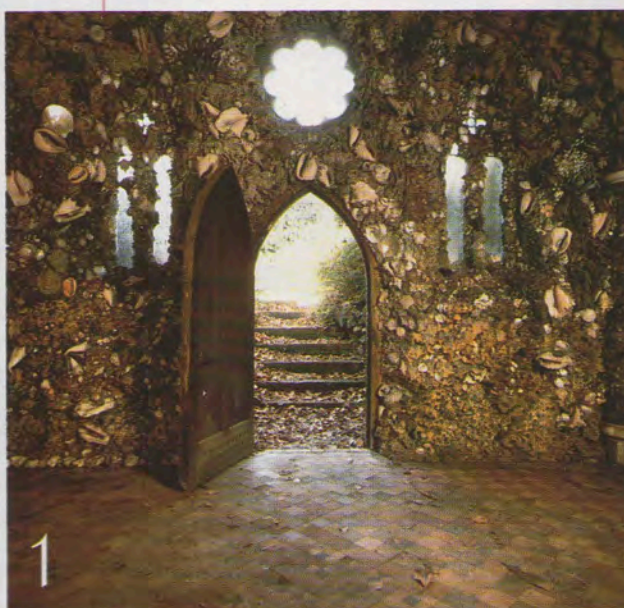
THE SHELL GROTTO, Margate, Kent, 01843 220008. No one knows the origin of this mysterious shell grotto, discovered in 1835, that comprises a series of passageways and rooms. Theories abound about its creation, from 18th-century cavern to ancient Mithraic temple.

THE SHELL HOUSE, Goodwood House, Chichester, West Sussex, 01243 755048. Created in the 1740s by the Duchess of Richmond and her

daughters, this pavilion is decorated with 500,000 shells and is one of the most elegant and intricate shell schemes in Britain. Open to the public on selected dates by written prior appointment with the Curator.

SCOTT'S GROTTO, Ware, Hertfordshire, 01920 464131, scotts-grotto.org. Built by the poet John Scott in the 1760s, it is made up of a series of subterranean interconnecting rooms, including a Council Chamber, all beautifully decorated with shells, flints and coloured glass.

THE GROTTO, Woburn Abbey, Bedfordshire, 01525 290666, woburnabbey.co.uk. Woburn boasts a 17th-century indoor room, which is thought to be one of the oldest surviving shell schemes in Britain. Most of the shells are Ormer shells from the Channel Islands.



Grottoes were used for tea-drinking or late-night revelries, illuminated by candles in sconces

keen shell collector, reserving the exotic specimens for her private collection and using the rest to create her grotto where, as well as using seashells, she also encrusted the walls with thousands of snail shells. She was helped in her task by Mrs Mary Delany, who had already worked on several grotto projects at her homes in Ireland and became a celebrated proponent of shell decoration.

One of the most curious shell houses that is still in existence was also designed by a pair of ladies – the Parminster cousins – who constructed A La Ronde at Exmouth in the 1790s. This 16-sided roundhouse was

1 The grotto at Goldney was begun in 1737 and finished in 1764. The ornamental rocks, shells and fossils may have been gifts to the owner, Thomas Goldney, from America or the West Indies.

2 At Leeds Castle, a huge face of Typhoeus, a giant in Greek mythology, spews molten lava (water) across the cobbled floor. Above are heraldic beasts and swans picked out in burnt flint, coal, brick and iridescent shell.



built on their orders, to house a collection of objects brought back from a grand tour of Europe, including their vast assortment of shells, which were used to decorate a gallery on the first floor. Now owned by The National Trust, the gallery is so delicate it can only be viewed by closed-circuit television.

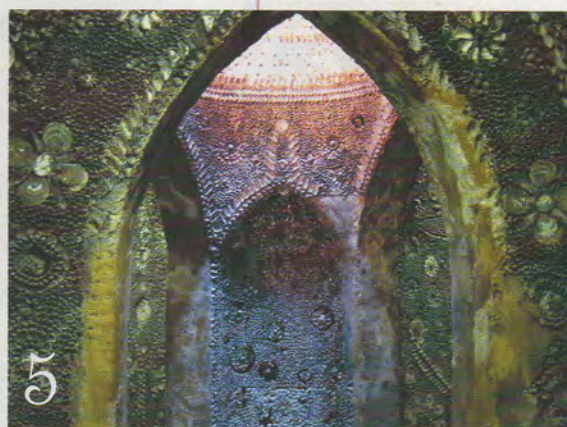
By the Victorian age, shellwork was no longer at the height of fashion and although it remained popular as a hobby for ladies, it had degenerated into the slightly kitsch form that is evident today in seaside souvenir shops. Trinket boxes and picture frames were thought to be the best objects for decoration, and while many of them are charming, they by no means convey the splendour of the mysterious grottoes that originally inspired them.

NEW DESIGNS

The last 20 years has seen a revival in shellwork – many older grottoes are being restored, while innovative new designs are being created. One

of the most stunning grottoes designed in recent years is at the centre of the maze at Leeds Castle, where a hollowed-out hill has been converted into a series of chambers representing the underworld. Shell swans, phoenixes and mythical beasts decorate the walls and ceiling, along with crystals, fossils and animal

bones, while at the centre of the grotto, water cascades from the lips of a giant's face. Built in the late 1980s, the grotto has become one of the most popular attractions at Leeds Castle, proving that the lure of decorated subterranean passageways endures. Uniting the best of artifice and nature, shell rooms continue to stimulate the imagination, enchant the intellect and dazzle the senses. **CH&I**

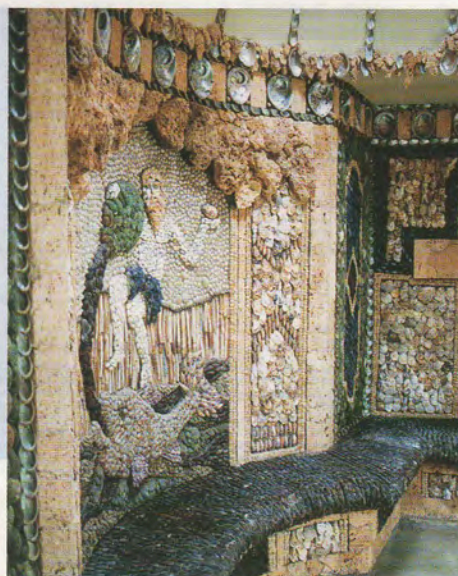
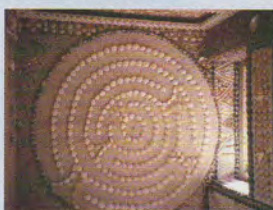


A GROTTO OF YOUR OWN

Shell decorations are suitable for indoor or outdoor use, in a porch, bathroom, summer house, cellar or anywhere else. The artists here both specialise in grotto and shellwork and have created some beautiful contemporary shell schemes:

■ Blott Kerr-Wilson (right),
020 7371 8174.

■ Belinda Eade (far right),
020 7266 0328,
belindaeade.com.



3 On the ceiling of The Shell House, Goodwood, a different flower is created in shells inside every square.

4 Viewed from a flint tunnel, the Council Chamber at Scott's Grotto contains a seat recessed into an archway. Above the seat is a star pattern picked out in shells.

5 The origin of the underground grotto at Margate is a mystery. Over four million shells decorate the walls, in patterns representing druid and pagan symbolism. At midday on the summer solstice, the sun shines directly into the grotto's dome.