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HOUSE OF SHELLS

PATRICIA CLEVELAND-PECK visits the triumphant restoration of a Welsh shell house that recaptures the evocative and fantastical tastes of another age

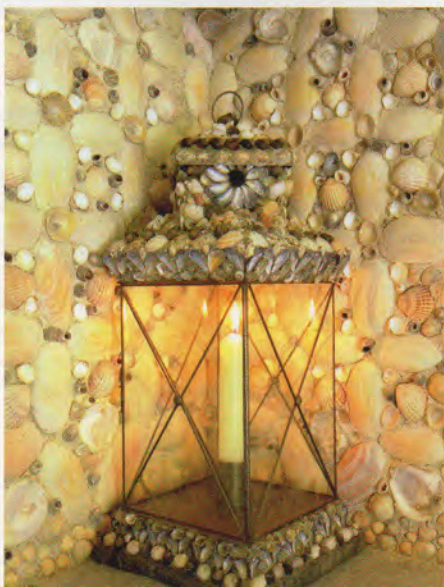


The panels of shell work, which were restored by Blott Kerr-Wilson



(Above) The 1820s house at Cilwendeg resembles a palace from a fairy tale

(Below) Lanterns of shell work



IT is sometimes the most ephemeral buildings that take us more directly into the spirit of another age. We feel the 16th century in its banqueting houses, the 18th century in its temples and the 19th century in its remote mausoleums. The Regency we can find in *cottages ornées* and rustic pavilions—none more engaging, nor more fragile, than the Shell House at Cilwendeg, near Boncath, Pembrokeshire, which has just been masterfully restored by The Temple Trust.

Cilwendeg was one of the major gentry houses of the Teifi Valley, and its estate farm one of the most extensive. The house was rebuilt from an earlier farmhouse by Morgan Jones the elder, in about 1780. He had inherited the estate from his mother Margaret Morgan's side of the family, acquiring also the rights to the Skerries lighthouse off Anglesey—every ship out of Liverpool or Cardigan Bay which came within sight of the lighthouse paid a toll of a penny a ton.

Morgan Jones amassed considerable wealth, but he was a strange, reclusive individual, whom, having remodelled his house and endowed the little church of Capel Coleman, lived quietly until his death in 1826. His nephew and heir, Morgan Jones the younger, undertook major renovations between 1820 and 1830. As well as work on the mansion, probably by the architect Edward Haycock of Shrewsbury, he developed some of the estate buildings in a style similar to that proposed in John Plaw's 1785 design book *Ferme Ornée or Rural Improvements*.

Among the Picturesque buildings—which included a laundry, dairy, counting house, barns, stables, bathhouse, cowsheds, cart sheds and a remarkable fowl house with sawn slate nesting boxes—was the Shell House.

The mansion survives as a nursing home, but some of the farm buildings are now in a state of decay, and it is thanks to a band of devoted people, headed by Suzannah Fleming of The Temple Trust, that the Shell House, perhaps the most fragile of them, has been restored for the public to enjoy.

Approached through the sylvan gloom, the Shell House, a small building glittering in a clearing, provides a pleasing aesthetic shock, as was always the

intention. Local white quartz dresses its front elevation, and pinnacles of the same local stone decorate its elaborate crow-stepped gable roof, the top-most pinnacle of which somewhat resembles a bird with outstretched wings.

The overall effect of the exterior is that of a cottage from a fairy tale; inside, it is yet more glittering and fantastical in flavour. With its shimmering shell- and mineral-encrusted walls and ceiling, the interior never fails to evoke a gasp from the visitor.

It was traditionally the ladies of the house who had a hand in the shell decoration of garden buildings, even if, rather than undertaking the work themselves, they only issued the instructions. The passion for shells reached its zenith in the 18th century, when exotic varieties arrived by the ton from the West Indies; however, this room is different in that most of the shells came from local Welsh beaches.

The floors are decorated with patterns formed from the knuckle bones of sheep and oxen and vertebrae from horses. The early-19th-century taste was for more rustic, Picturesque garden buildings. It is not known who decorated the room at Cilwendeg, but it would certainly have been used for tea parties and entertainments by the family.

As with so many of these vulnerable buildings the Shell House fell into disrepair over the years. The previous owner, Alan Bowen of Cilwendeg Farm, managed to reroof the building in 1999, but by this stage, much of the shell-work had fallen from the walls and the ceiling. The latter was described in 1953 by Barbara Jones in *Follies and Grottoes* as being 'domed', but had, according to Headley and Meulenkamp, collapsed by 1986 and been replaced by a flat one.

In the course of Mr Bowen's project, much of the debris was swept outside, where it remained buried on the forecourt until being unearthed during the archaeological investigation undertaken for The Temple Trust by Cambria Archaeology. Fragments of coloured glass, faceted quartz, coal and gun flints, as well as cockle, limpet, mussel, oyster, razor and otter shells were collected and bagged up. A few shell panels remained in fairly good condition. Photographs of these, as well as the archaeological findings, provided



A tea house beyond compare: shells on the walls and ceiling and bones and knuckles on the floor, all restored by The Temple Trust

architect Roger Clive-Powell with a basis for design before the whole was stripped down for restoration.

Ken Filkins was appointed as builder, and Blott Kerr-Wilson, a leading shell artist, moved on site to recreate the work in shell and bone. For the three months this took, Suzannah Fleming—in the unusual position of being both client and apprentice—worked beside her ‘doing the mussel arches, as Blott did the clever designs in the middle’.

Another of Miss Fleming’s duties was to go to the beach to collect shells, as the majority of those used came from the Pembrokeshire coast. Investigations had revealed that the centre of some panels had been dominated by an exotic pink conch.

Finally, the glade itself was landscaped, reinstating the white-quartz rockery, and the surrounding woodland was replenished with trees to create the sombre approach that perfectly sets off the sparkle of this precious little building. 🐦

Entry to the Shell House is free, but donations are welcome and are shared by Capel Coleman Church, whose Father Paul opens it for visitors every Thursday during the summer and early autumn. For hours of opening, telephone The Temple Trust on 020-7482 6171.

The Temple Trust was founded to rescue and preserve historic garden buildings in their settings for the enjoyment of the public. It may be contacted at 7, Southampton Road, London NW5 4SJ.

Photographs: Simon Harpur.