



Issue ISSN 0963-9004 Volume 15, No.4

59 **AUTUMN 2004**

Price £3.00 (\$5.00/€5.00)

follies

THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE FOR FOLLIES, GROTTOS & GARDEN BUILDINGS

**LADY WALPOLE'S
GROTTO, CHELSEA**

**THE McBEE HOUSE
BEAR CAVE**

SHELLS

ITALIAN GROTTOS

**SEVERNDROOG
CASTLE**

**BALLYMALOE
SHELL HOUSE**

BYGONE FOLLIES

**THE CASCADE
AND GROTTO AT
BOWOOD**

-
- Mike Cousins
 - Oliver Bradbury
 - Rita Boogaart
 - Anji Petersen
 - Pieter Boogaart
 - David Matthews





Severndroog Castle

ANJI PETERSEN

Picture a dramatic eighteenth-century gothic tower built by a heart-broken widow in a clearing, high on a hill, in an ancient bluebell wood, within seven miles of Charing Cross, London. This is Severndroog Castle on Shooters Hill, South East London; a 60-foot high triangular, brick-built tower designed in the Gothic style by architect Richard Jupp. Severndroog Castle is a nationally-listed Grade II* building, presently on English Heritage's *Buildings At Risk* register. It was built in 1784 as a memorial to Sir William James by his widow to commemorate his most famous exploit in 1755 when he destroyed the fleet and stronghold of pirates on an Island fortress on the Malabar coast of India.

Sir James' is a rags-to-riches story. He rose from being a humble ploughboy from West Wales, who ran away to sea aged 12, to being the Commodore of the East India Company Fleet. He was also a Director of the East India Company, a Master of Trinity House and Governor of the Royal Hospital Greenwich. He made his fortune from prize money as a bold captain when fighting a French fleet off India.

The castle remained in the James family for many years. In 1922 Severndroog Castle and the surrounding woodland was bought by the London County Council (LCC) for the use of Londoners 'in perpetuity' as a 'lung for London'. The Greater London Council (GLC) took over the ownership in 1965 and continued to allow public access to the castle. They also maintained the small tearoom on the ground floor of the castle that had become enormously popular in the post war years. With the demise of the GLC in 1986, ownership of the castle and woods passed to the London Borough of Greenwich. They decided that they did not have the resources to maintain the castle and tearoom. The castle was closed and boarded up in 1988. Since then it has been subject to vandalism and decay. Greenwich Council now wishes to dispose of the castle and surrounding woodland by way of a 150 year lease to a property developer who wants to convert it into office space and car parking.

The roof of the tower is 50 feet higher than the cross on St Paul's Cathedral, offering breathtaking views across London. On a clear day features in seven counties can be seen from this magnificent vantage point. Many thousands of local people have supported the formation of the Severndroog Castle Building Preservation Trust (SCBPT), a community based group that has

dedicated itself to raising the funds to restore Severndroog Castle to its former glory and place the building at the centre of community life.

The purpose of the Trust is to raise the funds to acquire, restore and manage Severndroog as a community resource. The Trust is committed to guaranteeing full public access to the castle once it is restored. Projected future uses for the castle under the management of the SCBPT include: franchising a small café or tearoom, a venue for community events, a woodland interpretation centre, hire for weddings, receptions and meetings and making a small charge to access the viewing gallery on the roof.

The Trust have been successful in getting more publicity for the building through appearing on BBC's *Restoration 2004* where 21 buildings 'in need' around the UK compete to win the funds for their restoration and renovation. At the time of going to press, it is not known whether Severndroog has won the South East region of Restoration. If successful, we go through to the live final in August against six other buildings around the UK. If unsuccessful, the Trust will continue to fight to preserve this important building for all to enjoy.

Ballymaloe Shell House

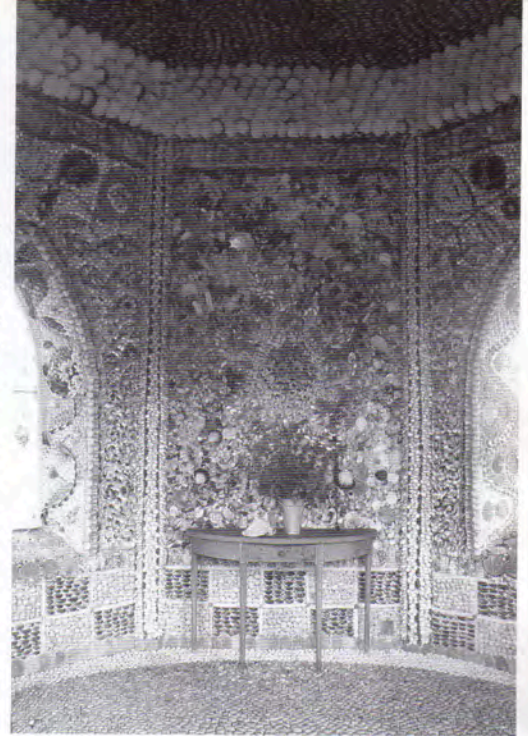
PIETER BOOGAART

The Ballymaloe Cookery School Gardens near Shanagarry, Co. Cork, Ireland, date back to the nineteenth century and have been carefully restored. The attractions include a number of different gardens such as one would expect at a cookery school, a pond with a portico that was salvaged from somewhere (a pious portal!), a cast-iron structure looking very oriental and temple-like, and a shell house.

A double herbaceous border leads through a field to this plain octagonal little building, which has a pointed door, pointed windows and a pointed roof. It is owned by Darina and Tim Allen, whose initials are inside over the door of this shell house and who run the cookery school. They employed artist and decorator Blot Kerr-Wilson, who spent four idyllic months working on this shell house, until it was finished in time for Darina and Tim's silver wedding celebration in October 1995. Blot (apparently short for Charlotte) started on the ceiling, working like a latter-day Michelangelo lying on her back on the scaffolding and later did the walls, putting the smaller shells near the top and the larger ones towards the bottom. To quote from *FOLLIES*



magazine # 46, p. 6 '...the entire inside walls, ceiling and floor ... are created in a tapestry of shells from around the world.' Simply beautiful. For relaxation Blot made day-trips to the sea and collected the shells she needed besides the supply the Allens had assembled over the years. After four months they all came together to decide how much money would be paid. They did that by writing down the number that felt fair and then comparing. Seems like a good enough method to me.



BALLYMALOE SHELL HOUSE, EXTERIOR AND INTERIOR

Bygone Follies

DAVID MATTHEWS

Three pavilions of the 1868 building of St Thomas' Hospital remain. Likewise the core of The Grange, Northington built in 1840, is still standing but only courtesy of a £0.5m government grant. These are two small remnants of buildings that Sir John Betjeman considered were among too many masterpieces that were 'destroyed forever by time and barbarians'.

The poet laureate cited another 31 such lost treasures that were scattered throughout the United Kingdom but of which nothing remains except as a part of the history of the country and as part of a series of silver medals struck by John Pinches Medallists Limited. They were issued one a month from March 1973 for the series entitled *Bygone Britain* and were engraved by John Jennings from pencil sketches by Peter Jackson, a noted authority on London. The remainder of the set of 36 was made up with 3 buildings that are likely to be well known to Folly Fellows.

Firstly under Junction 26 of the M1 to the north west of Nottingham was the site of 'the most liveable of the four Palladian villas in England'. This was Nuthall Temple, built 1754-57 for Sir Charles Sedley (1720-78) and there is a suggestion he paid for its construction using the profits he made from horse racing wagers. Its magnificence can be seen in *Country Life* in 1923 but not too much store should be set by the articles as it was written when there was doubt as to the architect (Thomas or Stephen Wright?) and Sanderson Miller's name was ascribed to the Summerhouse. More recently Colvin and Pevsner attribute the design of both buildings to Thomas Wright (1711-86). The end for

the house came in 1929 and its demolition was said by Pevsner to be 'a disgrace'. Despite the fate of the house, the battlemented Gothic Summerhouse of 1759 is extant and described by Headley and Meulenkamp as 'scary' but 'real folly'.

On another medal is 'Xanadu', created for the Khan of Hafod by Thomas Baldwin in 1786-88, with a later octagonal library being added by John Nash. There is a basis for this fanciful description in that Coleridge visited 'this extraordinary spot which none but a painter or poet could describe'. The reality is that Hafod and its grounds, not far from Devils Bridge in mid Wales, was the inspiration of one Thomas Johnes. Despite his passion for his mountain retreat, it seems it was never meant to last for it was struck by fire on 13 March 1807. Johnes saw his Phoenix rise again, but after his death in 1816 at the age of 68, it was gradually downhill for Hafod until its demolition on 13 August 1858. All that remains is Johnes's 1810 Arch, built to commemorate the Golden Jubilee of George III. Its construction is made to sound very incongruous by Headley and Meulenkamp who detail it as 'two massive drystone-style piers' supporting 'a spindly structure'.

Thomas Johnes went to the predecessor of the place illustrated on the final medal in the *Bygone Britain* series. This was in 1807 when he bought chimneys at the contents sale of Fonthill Splendens, which was demolished in favour of William Beckford's short-lived and larger-than-life Fonthill Abbey. It is hardly necessary to mention that in 1825 the 276 feet tower of the Abbey collapsed through insubstantial foundations being put in by the architect James Wyatt, and much of the remainder of the building came down with it. Fortunately the Oratory, Sanctuary and Lancaster Tower remain as reminders of possibly the greatest folly this country has ever seen.

Obviously the 39mm commemorative medals show the houses at their magnificent best rather than the folly remains. However, for those who are interested, the medals do come up for sale from time to time and usually are priced at £10 to £14.



FONTHILL ABBEY MEDAL, LIFE SIZE