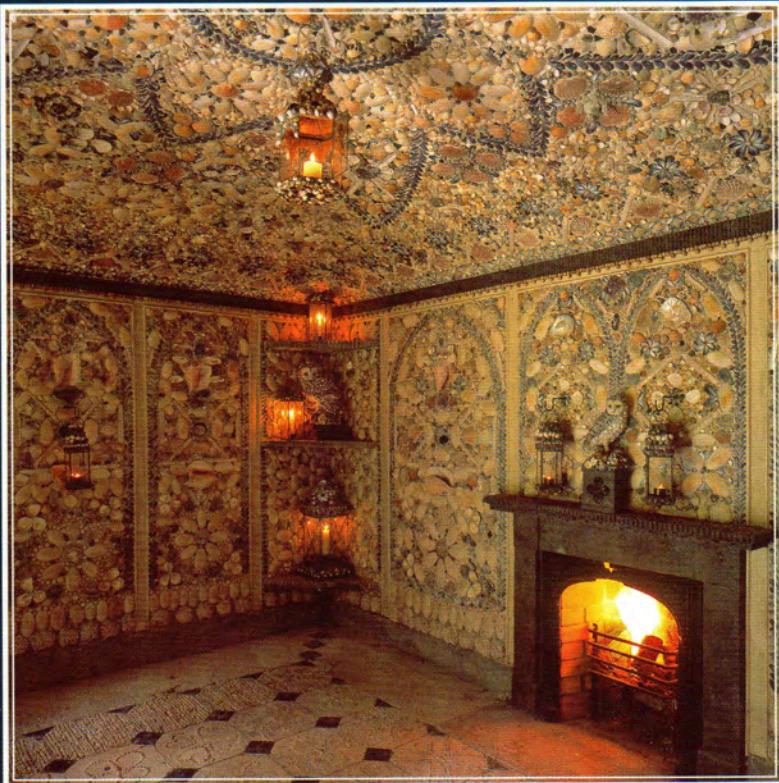


Number 11 Winter 2011

The *Follies* Journal

GROTTOES
AND OTHER FOLLIES



EDITOR
Iain Jackson

Published by the *Folly* Fellowship

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CONTRIBUTORS

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Suzannah Fleming M.A. is a garden and landscape historian and has worked as an independent consultant to English Heritage. Her work has recently included the completion of a two-year research programme on the park and garden of the Earls of Shaftesbury at St. Giles's House, Wimborne St. Giles in Dorset. She is also the chairman (and founding member) of The Temple Trust, a historic building preservation charity. She has served the trust as project manager for the rescue of both Garrick's Temple to Shakespeare at Hampton and The Cilwendeg Shell House in Pembrokeshire. She is currently developing a study facility near London that will provide access to the trust's extensive academic book and journal collection.

Blott Kerr-Wilson was born in North Wales and educated mainly in England until the age of sixteen. She then worked in London doing many different jobs from cleaning hotel rooms to arranging flowers in grand houses. In her late twenties she studied Sculpture at Goldsmith's College and since a young age has been interested in shell follies/grottoes. This resulted in her deciding to create her own grotto in her council house bathroom in Peckham, south London. *The World of Interiors* magazine ran a competition to design a room and Blott's shelled bathroom won. This success changed her life and ever since she has been lucky enough to work in lots of great places doing what she loves.

Jo Farb Hernandez is Director of SPACES (Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments), a non-profit archive documenting self-taught artistic activity on an international scale. She is also Director of the Thompson Art Gallery and Professor in the School of Art and Design at San José State University. She serves as a Contributing Editor for Raw Vision magazine, is a member of the National Advisory Board for the Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park in North Carolina, and on the International Advisory Board for the Fred Smith art environment in Wisconsin. She has authored or co-authored over thirty books and exhibition catalogues including, *Forms of Tradition in Contemporary Spain*, (winner of the prestigious Chicago Folklore Prize in 2006) and *A.G. Rizzoli: Architect of Magnificent Visions*. Recipient of a 2008 Fulbright Senior Scholar award, she is currently writing a book on Spanish art environments.

Lisa Stone is curator of the Roger Brown Study Collection of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she's also adjunct associate professor in the department of Art History, Theory and Criticism. She's engaged in the documentation and preservation of art environments, and is devoted to ongoing work on a garden/ruin in Spring Lake, Wisconsin.

Jim Zanzi is professor emeritus at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago whose work concerns architecture, monuments, and tombs, through sculpture and photography. Ongoing work includes a formal, memorial garden in Spring Lake, WI, and reviving buildings and creating gardens in Mineral Point, WI, to honour the legacy of Edgar Hellum, Bard Pendarvis. Stone and Zanzi co-teach the art history class, Better Homes & Gardens, Vernacular Art Environments at SAIC.

PREFACE

This edition of the Follies Journal is primarily concerned with the phenomenon of the Grotto.

The Grotto is perhaps the most elusive and introverted type within the Folly family; but it is also, perhaps, the most magical, intriguing and mystical. Grottoes don't act as distant beacons on the horizon, nor do they serve as something beautiful to look at within the forest – they are rarely concerned with facade, grandeur or extravagant public displays of wealth. Whereas the 'eye-catcher', tower, temple, pyramid, obelisk and even the hermitage all clamour for our attention, the grotto lies low; it awaits discovery and then snares its onlooker into travelling deeper into its unknown darkness (visually as well as physically). Grottoes are concerned, primarily with the interior. They sometimes have facades but their focus is always directed towards the innards, there are few windows or views to speak of, and frequently we are lead into subterranean caverns filled with secrets and rituals that invoke the 'primitive' and the pagan. The darkness and subterranean atmosphere, coupled with the iconography, water and rustic finishes create a sense of unease and we begin to mistake the trickle of water for whispers in the shadows.

That said, the papers in this journal also present how the Christian faith has influenced the design of these places, and the grotto can also be observed outside of its natural darkened habitat and opened up for all to see above ground.

It is beyond the scope of this brief introduction to present even a condensed history of the grotto, but perhaps the interested reader should begin with Italy and the notion of the grotesque as a means provoking a curious delight. Grottoes have a sublime ugliness about them; they are unkempt, damp and 'other' to our normal existence, yet we also find a primordial satisfaction when we descend into their depths which are suggestive of the womb and a return to the earth. Equally they are also treasure troves – they contain 'precious things', exotic shells, minerals as well possessing non-tangible properties and being capable, it is said, of bringing healing, enlightenment and spiritual connection.

This edition is also heavily indebted to biography. The key protagonists are discussed, their lives revealed, and a connection is made in all the papers between architectural output and the person responsible for the work. These papers are not intent on providing grand interpretations and academic pomposity – instead they reveal the human lives behind the grotto.

Another theme found in the articles is that of restoration. Each of these wonderful grottoes has, in some way, been 'lost and found', dilapidated and restored – there is a redemption story with each article, although not always an entirely happy ending.

The article by Blott Kerr-Wilson is a candid account of remaking the grotto at Eaton Hall, Cheshire. It strays from the academic conventions and presents to us a brief report on the actual making of the grotto. This is not something we often

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Iain Jackson

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Iain Jackson

Dedicated to the Memory
of
Jeffery Whitelaw
1918 – 2011
Author of
Follies (Shire Books)

THE MAKING OF EATON HALL GROTTO

BLOTT KERR-WILSON

*“The greatest treasures and most wonderful things lie
hidden underground – and not without reason”*

—Rabelais

Having grown up in North Wales until the age of sixteen, I was very excited when I received a telephone call by the Interior Designers who were refurbishing Eaton Hall asking if I would be interested in a small job. I remember Eaton Hall from my childhood when I used to ride around the grounds before the present house was built. I was curious to revisit. The job needed to be done was described loosely to me. I met Gail Camu who was in charge of the refurbishment at Euston Station and that is where the story really began to get going.

Situated between a large stable yard and a chapel inside a splendid building designed by Alfred Waterhouse (fig. 1), the grotto is hidden and only visible from the corridor that leads to the chapel (fig. 2). It was originally built as a fernery to display the owner's collection of plants. During the Second World War the house and the surrounding buildings were leased to the Army who used it as an Officer Cadet Training School. During this time the fernery was abandoned.

There is no point doing preliminary drawings for a job like this as the overall result is unknown. I sent a rather lyrical description of what I foresaw and sent a box of shells. It took me days trying to put a description together as writing I find difficult and I really wanted this job. I was so delighted when I heard that I had the go-ahead...

I was commissioned to build a grotto in the old fernery and when I first arrived to view the site in 2000 it would have been very easy to have walked straight past the dark space where I was going to spend three months creating a new environment. There was nothing to make one curious as to what lay behind the only viewing spot other than a tall gothic window which added to the intrigue and element of surprise (fig. 3).

On closer inspection I discovered a small amount of natural light coming from the very top of the space between some stalactites. It was a sad lonely space with a few plastic ferns hanging down between the dusty rocks. Despite the neglect, it was immediately clear that the rock work was fabulously executed by artisans adept at such work (fig.4).

The space measures 8 meters high, 2.5 meters wide and 5 meters long. The thought of building a grotto in this vast space was daunting, but there was already such a wonderful existing structure that I was ready to start work straight away.

The work was executed by a team of four. Tom Verity (who had been involved in the restoration of Painshill grotto and Leeds castle) and Jonathan Furbank were in charge of re-building and adding new stalactites and the rock work. Lisa Sutton and I carried out the shell work.

It was very much a collaborative project and in order to deliver a coherent solution all of us contributed to the concept and design stage. When we arrived to commence the work, the scaffolding was already in place and the space had been carefully cleaned out (fig. 5). We had four working platforms at different levels throughout the lofty space, but there was no space to stand upright except on the very top level. The structure of the scaffolding was extremely complex, almost delicate, and it needed to be reconstructed three times during the work so that we could access different working areas. Each time the scaffolding was changed it was orchestrated with such care and what looked like great ease despite the space being so small for such muscled men, metal poles and timber planks.

STALACTITES

The original stalactites were made from cork bark; these had to be extensively restored as they had either been water damaged or eaten by worms. A total of fifteen new ones were to be carefully made. Each stalactite was supported with a pine wood frame built to carry the final dressing of cork oak bark (fig. 6). Inevitably the addition of these elements rendered personnel mobility almost impossible as the top floor gradually filled up with the substructures for the stalactites. A process that would take hundreds of years in a real cave was undertaken here in a matter of weeks. The spiked ends of the frames certainly managed to cause numerous injuries and provoked choice language, not helped by the poor ventilation and lots of temporary electric lighting that made the working conditions cramped and uncomfortable. I felt at that time that sticking thousands of shells onto surfaces was by far the more comfortable option and I let my mind wander with thoughts of the finished product.

SHELLS AND MINERALS

Before the shelling work could commence, I took lots of photographs and using these we worked out the overall shelling/stalactite plan. Everything had to be visually correct and coherent from the one gothic aperture viewing spot. The scaffolding prevented any inspection of the work so we had to solely rely on these important photographic sketches. We could not even take out the scaffolding planks to see what we were doing as the risk of damaging the work was far too great. The original rock work helped us plan the work and largely dictated the principle shelling areas. It was important to know 'when to stop' shelling and when to expose the original rock. We marked out the areas with chalk, and as the project progressed, these areas were sometimes changed. We let previous work inform the later work and as such there was an evolution in the design. We were not slavishly bound to our original plans (fig. 7). During most projects there is a time which Tom Verity termed an "ugly period". During this unfortunate phase of the project one hopes that the client does not come to visit site!



FIGURE 2. Interior of the C

FIGURE 3. A gothic portal into another r

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FIGURE 1. Eaton Hall,
designed by
Alfred Waterhouse



Iain Jackson



FIGURE 2. Interior of the Chapel



FIGURE 3. A gothic window frame serves as the
portal into another world by Alfred Waterhouse



FIGURE 4. Working with the surviving rockwork from the fernery

The work does not seem to be progressing or even making much aesthetic sense – we had a number of these ugly periods. One tool that we used frequently was a laser beam pointer, it was quicker than going up the ladders and we all got tired of trying to describe which rock or shells needed changing or adding too. Both of us had about 12 to 15 pots of different shells that needed to be within arms reach most of the time and the cavities created to house the ferns made convenient and interesting pots holders. They also served us well for perching in when shelling the difficult areas that were otherwise inaccessible.

The shells chosen for this project were ones that were available “in abundance” at the time of construction. They come from all over the world. There is a mixture of

local shells, often provided by visitors or collected by us. The tiny shells that people provided have been used next to the viewing area so it is possible to spot specific donated shells (fig. 8). In all, there were around 75 different types of shells used.

Incorporated throughout the work is tufa rock, calcite, gypsum and geodes which had mostly come from around the Bristol area. The materials were adhered using lime mortar.

Lisa Sutton and I worked on our own predefined shelling areas having previously marked them out with chalk; in some ways it was a bit like *colouring by numbers!* The original rockwork helped us keep our directions as we were able to follow the existing lines or movements. As we had worked together before, our shelling styles were similar so that the joining of our shell work did not provide a problem and is almost seamless.



FIGURE 5. Scaffolding for access within the six metre high volume



FIGURE 6. Pine st



FIGURE 8. Don



FIGURE 6. Pine structure to form the stalactites



FIGURE 7. Initial Shells, “shelling by numbers?”



FIGURE 8. Donated shells were given prime locations near to the viewing window



FIGURE 9. School children visit during the construction of the grotto



FIGURE 10. Removal of the scaffold was a tense moment



FIGURE 11. Completion towards the ceiling

One of the hazards of this kind of work is dropping the shells (often individually selected for a specific location) and having to go and pick them up from ground level six meters below whilst trying to get past the other artists and without being disfigured by the sharp shells and rocks. That said, it was sometimes a relief to have to go down the ladders and not stay stuck in the same positions for hours. We were all very keen on our breaks which provided an opportunity for reflection and discrete glimpses through the scaffold.

During our working day we often had a stream of visitors. Twice during the project a group of school children came to visit from a deprived part of Merseyside (fig. 9). These children were naturally enthusiastic and asked great and numerous questions; rather poignantly, most of them had never seen or touched a real shell before or visited a beach (so of course they all had a go at holding a shell to their ears).

The last time the "Scaffolders" came was such a huge moment for the four of us, as we had been working away for months hoping that all our work and theories would work visually together. Because of the scaffolding blocking so much of the space we had not been able to stand back and get an overall view of what we had been up to during the last twelve weeks (fig. 10). The scaffolding came down very slowly, gradually revealing the work, and thankfully without damaging any of it. We knew that when the scaffolding had been removed we only had very limited access to our work, and no opportunity to make further changes; it just had to be right. It was only at that frighteningly exciting moment that we knew the work, so far, had come together as we envisaged (fig. 11).

LOWER SECTION

Because the only viewing area to the grotto was discrete, there had to be a way to direct visitors to it. A great way to attract attention is with the sound of running water.

This effect was achieved in two compartments. The first one and then is the second, which audibly grabs attention.

Around the basin, the stone.

One of the hardest discussions about the grotto was to have little known areas, such as the magician behind it, and the viewing window. However, these areas, in order to stimulate the imagination and

"And after having thought about it, I arose in me, the desire to see whether

.... So now that I have the answer without investigating

Blott Kerr-Wilson



FIGURE 11. Completed grotto looking up towards the ceiling

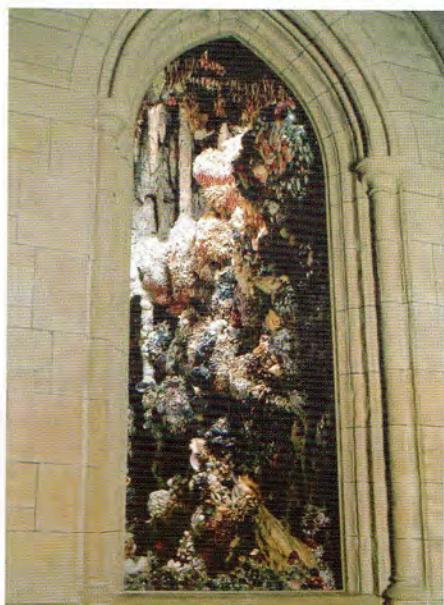


FIGURE 12. Grotto with specially designed illuminations

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This effect was achieved by building a large black fibreglass basin which had two compartments. The water gently cascades down from the large basin into a lower one and then is then pumped back, recycling the water. This subtle addition not only audibly grabs attention but also contributes to the feeling of a subterranean cave.

Around the basin and within the water are the only places where we added tufa stone.

One of the hardest parts of this scheme was at the very end and involved discussions about the lighting design. It is a specialized science which I confess to having little knowledge of. Tom Oates from Chelsea Lighting was the patient magician behind it. Not only did he have to create changeable seasonal lighting for a grotto, but had to ensure that none of the light fittings were visible from the viewing window. He also had to physically balance in unusual, even unfriendly areas, in order to run cables and the like. What he achieved was beyond my imagination and successfully contributes to the overall composition (fig. 12).

“And after having remained at the entry some time, two contrary emotions arose in me, fear and desire – fear of the threatening dark grotto, and desire to see whether there were any marvelous things within it”

—Leonardo da Vinci

.... So now that the job is finished I hope no one can walk through the corridor without investigating where the sound of water comes from....

Blott Kerr-Wilson

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GROTTOES AND OTHER FOLLIES

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