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A treasure in shells

Military might
at Milford

 Cadw



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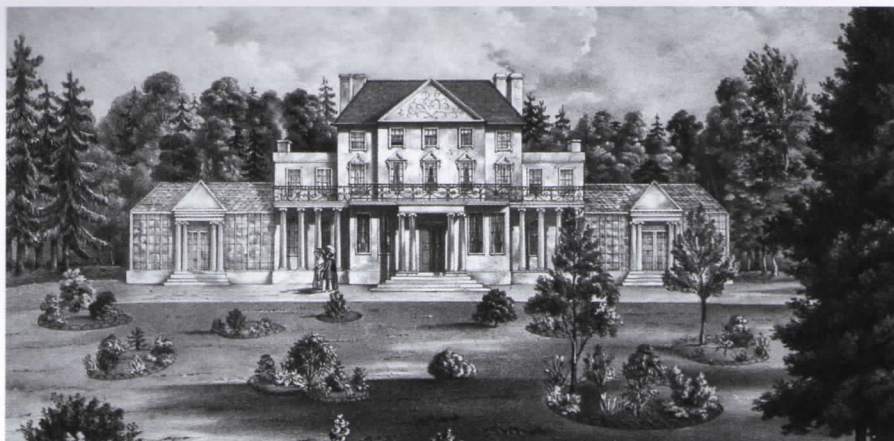
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Cockles and conches

Rob Wall describes the restoration of one of the most remarkable garden buildings in Wales. But the story starts with the Joneses ...



© Haverfordwest Library

The earliest view of Cilwendeg House in the 1830s

Almost three years ago, *Heritage in Wales* (Issue number 26) described the restoration of the lighthouse keeper's cottage on The Skerries, off the coast of Anglesey. It was owned by the Jones family, who had acquired the lighthouse through marriage, and, during the eighteenth century, had become seriously wealthy through the collection of tolls from shipping passing the treacherous rocks.

The expansion of the port of Liverpool from mid-century onwards, with the attendant increase in shipping along the north Wales coast, made Morgan Jones the elder (1740–1826) a very rich man. So let's follow the Joneses and see what they did with their fortune and how some of it was spent on a fine architectural gem more than 100 miles (161 km) away.

In common with many other self-made men of the time, Morgan Jones invested his money in developing a country estate. In his case it was the small gentry house of Cilwendeg, near Boncath in Pembrokeshire, which he had inherited from his mother in 1768. He rebuilt the house about 1780 and lived out his days contentedly as a country squire.

Cilwendeg was extensively remodelled in the 1820s and 30s by his heir, and nephew, Morgan Jones the younger (1787–1840); the architect for this work was probably Edward

© Roger Clive-Powell



Miss Blott Kerr-Wilson, repairing and recreating the details of the shell- and bone-work

The Shell House at Cilwendeg is one of the most unusual garden buildings in west Wales.



© Roger Clive-Powell

The interior, before restoration



The interior of the Shell House with fireplace and tiered corner shelves decorated with vertical indenting



The exterior of the Shell House

Haycock of Shrewsbury. At the same time an array of estate and ornamental buildings was erected around the mansion, including a laundry, a dairy, a farmhouse, a counting house, a barn, stables, a pigeon house, cowsheds and cart sheds, lodges, a bath house and, most remarkably, a shell house. The design of many of these buildings was of high quality, blending utility with amenity to produce a working agricultural estate of considerable elegance.

The Shell House at Cilwendeg, is one of the most unusual garden buildings in west Wales, a rare surviving example of the picturesque rustic style that was fashionable in the late Georgian period. It is hidden within a woodland glade to the south of the mansion, protected by ancient laurel bushes and guarded by sentinel boulders of roughly hewn white quartz. The building emerges out of this Romantic gloom as a glittering pavilion combining classical poise and symmetry, Gothic detailing and rustic ornament.

Flanking piers and horizontal stringcourses of local Cilgerran stone provide the basic framework of the façade. These are ornamented with vertical indenting that also occurs as a prominent feature of the interior. The walls of the building are constructed of coarsely cut white quartz, and irregular lumps of the same sparkling stone are mounted on

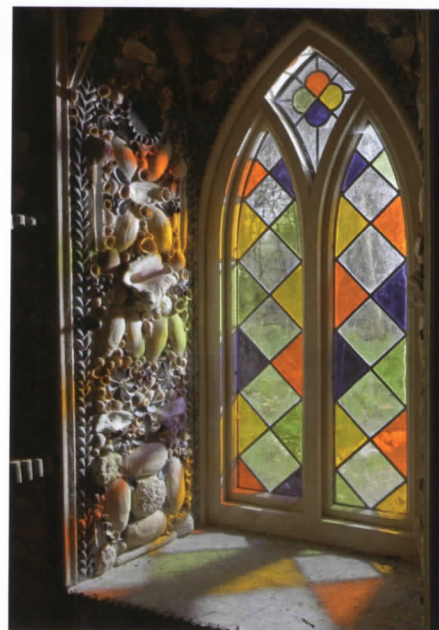
top of the stepped parapet that conceals the pitched roof behind.

The central door and adjacent windows are, by contrast, quite sophisticated Gothic designs in timber, filled with coloured glass and decorated with a thick but twinkling composition called 'lithic paint'. This consists of crushed brick, glass, sand, coal and foundry residue (from a blast furnace producing molten iron) pressed into a base of lead paint. The entrance is protected by a timber veranda.

Attractive though the exterior of the Shell House may be, it is the interior that provides the most remarkable surprise. The walls and roof are encrusted with shells and fragments of glass, arranged in panels of considerable complexity. The floor is laid out in ornamental 'tiles', made of the knuckle-bones of sheep and oxen, and they are decorated with delicate designs of knots, swirls, leaves, crosses and butterflies. Some of the designs appear to be overtly nautical in character and may be a conscious reflection of the source of the family's wealth. A small fireplace and tiered corner shelves are also decorated with the same vertical indenting found on the external Cilgerran stonework.

When oil lamps and candles are placed on the shelves, the whole interior glows and sparkles with magical effect. The Shell House would have been used as a garden retreat,

When oil lamps and candles are placed on the shelves, the whole interior glows and sparkles with magical effect.



Gothic timber window with coloured glass

© Roger Clive-Powell



Archaeological investigation in progress, undertaken by Cambria Archaeology

for quiet reading or for taking tea.

The building we see today is the product of five years of meticulous restoration by a group of dedicated professionals and craftspeople.

In 2000, the Shell House was a rather forlorn and damaged structure, shorn of its veranda and ceiling, and protected only by a temporary roof. The owner at that time, Mr Alan Bowen of Cilwendeg Farm, worked in partnership with the Temple Trust to secure the repair and long-term future of this delightful building.

The first stage was the appointment of a local architect experienced in the repair of historic properties, Roger Clive-Powell of Llanybydder in the Teifi valley, and the securing of grants from several sources, including Cadw and the Heritage Lottery Fund.

The next step was a full archaeological investigation of the building and its surroundings, undertaken in the summer of 2003 by Gwilym Hughes, Ken Murphy and Hubert Wilson of Cambria Archaeology. It involved the laying-out of a grid of two metre squares over the whole site. Each square was minutely examined and excavated, and this exercise produced an astonishing amount of information about the type and quantity of

shells, which included mussels, cockles, oysters, razor-shells, whelks, periwinkles, and limpets.

Fragments of the original window glazing were also found, while valuable evidence also came to light about the missing domed ceiling, enabling Suzannah Fleming of the Temple Trust and Roger Clive-Powell to produce a convincing design for its recreation. The archaeological excavation even unearthed some of the timbers of the original roof.

By spring 2004, Roger had finalized the drawings and specifications, and Ken Filkins of Llanllwni near Llanybydder had been appointed to do the building work. Tenders had also been received for the highly specialized job of repairing and recreating the shell-work and bone-work, for which Miss Blott Kerr-Wilson was appointed.

While Ken got cracking on site, Blott and Suzannah spent the summer collecting shells from the beaches of Pembrokeshire. Later that autumn, there were sufficient shells for Blott to start work, but the huge pink conch shells that form the centrepiece of each internal wall panel are not native to west Wales. Obtaining these proved impossible until Suzannah put out a local appeal for help. One by one they arrived, brought in by Pembrokeshire people whose ancestors had obtained them in the nineteenth century, and each conch came with its own adventure story or family history.

The task was completed in the spring of 2005, with the site works following that summer — the formation of landscaping, the creation of rockeries, the careful placing of

Visit the Shell House

From the first week of June 2006 the Cilwendeg Shell House will be open on Thursdays throughout the summer and early autumn. For the hours of opening please contact The Temple Trust on 020 7482 6171.

Cilwendeg is immediately to the east of the village of Boncath in Pembrokeshire, off the B4332, between Boncath and Newchapel. Lodges mark the entrance of the drive into the estate on the south side of the road. There is a small car park in the woodland on the right-hand side of the drive. Please do not park on the drive itself as this blocks access for emergency vehicles to the properties beyond.

each quartz boulder and the planting of innumerable ferns. The project has been a well-deserved triumph for all concerned.

And what happened to Morgan Jones the younger, for whom all this was originally created in the 1830s? He did not live to enjoy his creation for very long. He died in 1840 while locked in battle with Trinity House of London for control of The Skerries lighthouse. Trinity House won control in 1841, but a jury granted a huge sum of money as compensation to Morgan Jones's daughter and son-in-law — a staggering £22 million, at today's prices.

The Jones family took only a generation to spend their way through this fortune. In the twentieth century, the estate was slowly broken up through various sales and it is remarkable that the Shell House, perhaps the most delicate and vulnerable element of Cilwendeg, has found champions to ensure its happy survival for the future. ☘

The Temple Trust

The Shell House and its immediate surrounding woodland is owned by The Temple Trust. Since 1994, the Trust has functioned as a building preservation trust and has charitable status. It exists to rescue and preserve historic garden buildings and their settings. Suzannah Fleming is the Trust's chair. They may be contacted at 7 Southampton Road, London NW5 4JS.

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